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132 PAGES

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by C. H. Cogswell

BOOTHILL LOVER
by Gene Austin

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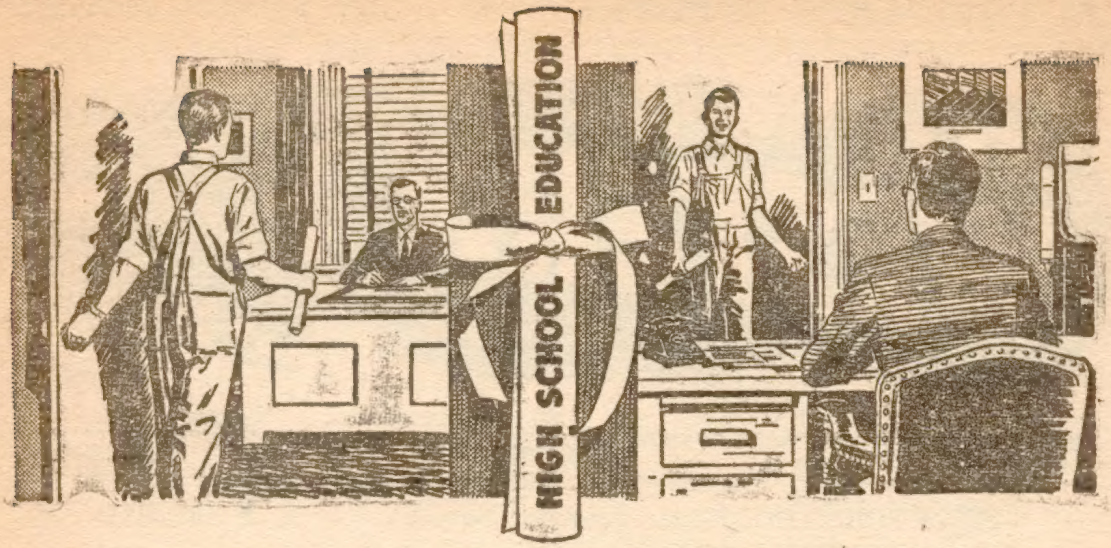

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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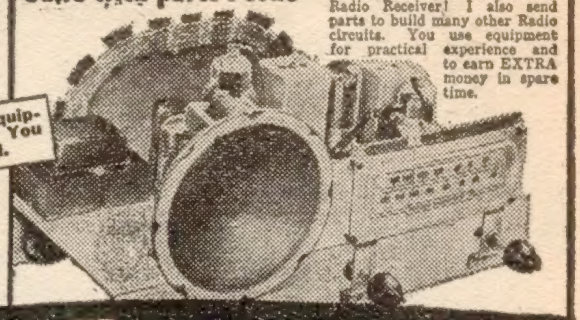

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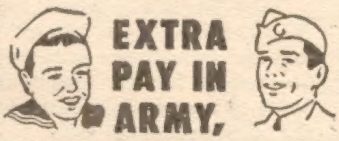

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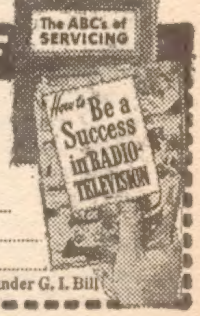

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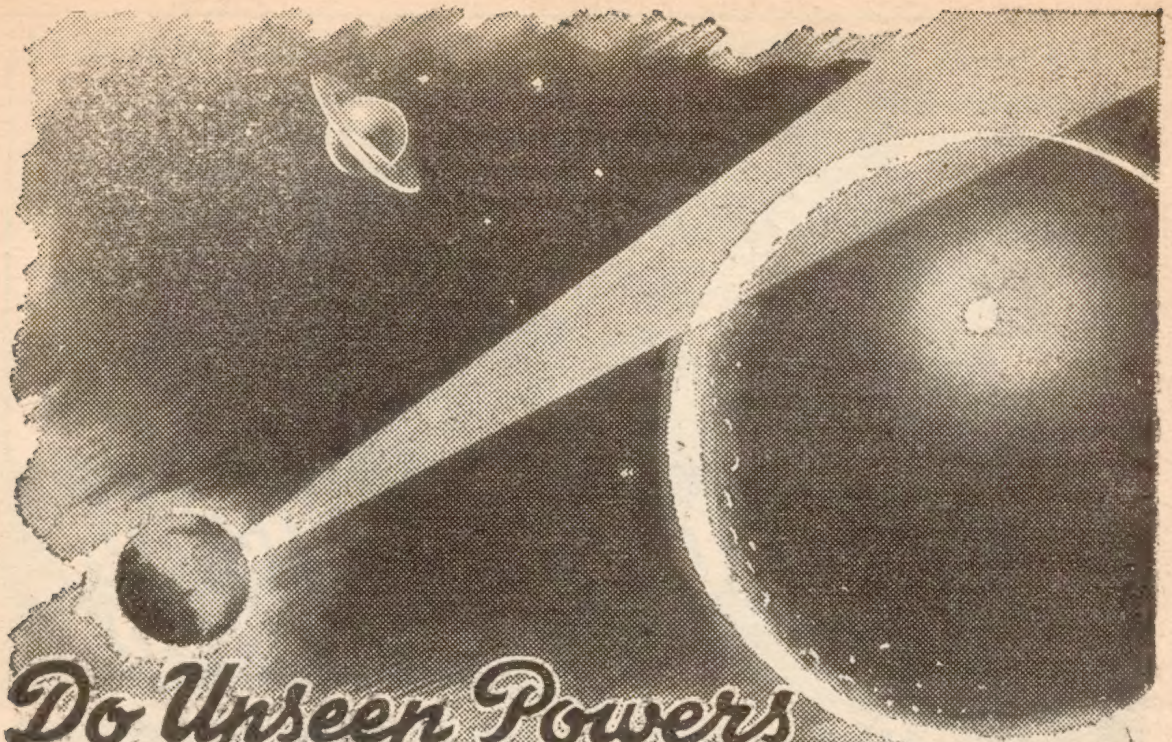

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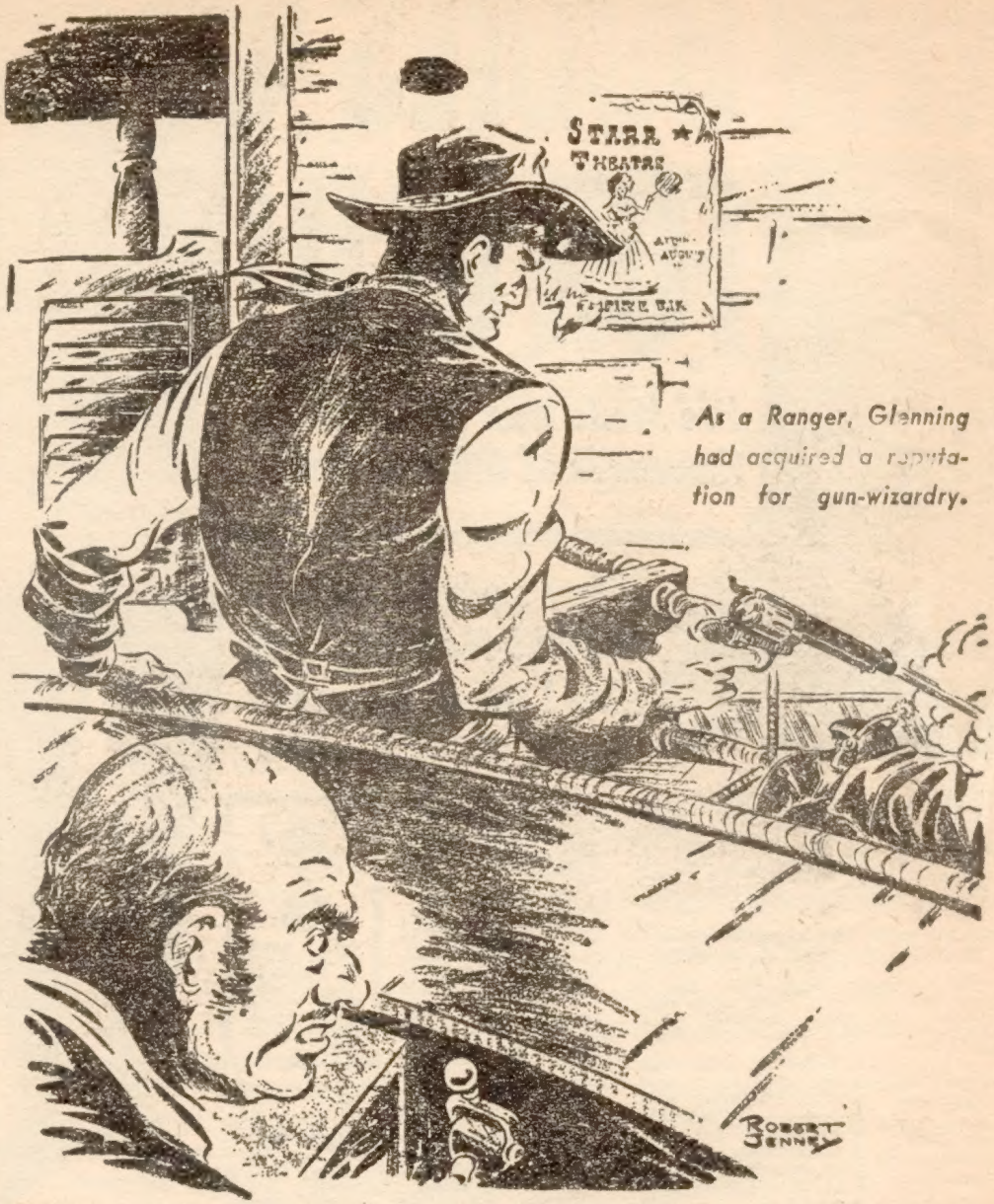


As a Ranger, Glenning had acquired a reputation for gun-wizardry.

"Dang it, I thought I'd come in here like a tornado from Texas, but instead I'm playing cat-and-mouse. And it's beginning to look rightdown uncertain as to whether I'm the cat or the mouse in this game!"

LARRY GLENNING waited until after dark to finish his journey into Shack Town. He had returned over the Gunsmoke Trail from Junction City without incident, and he had the receipt for nine thou-

TEXAS TORNADO

Feature "Larry Glenning" Novel

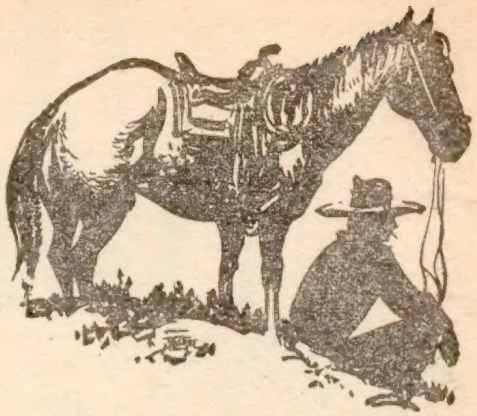
By C. H. Cogswell

sand in gold for Matthews, and one for five hundred for himself. Of the thousand agreed upon for his share for taking the gold out, Glenning had retained five hundred in currency. With the hundred he'd had on hand before he started, that would make about six hundred for him to live on. A man could get by for quite a while on that amount if he was careful. Larry was riding the big gray he had borrowed from Jethro while leading Dandy his own horse. He looped a long leg over the saddlehorn while he paused there on the ridge above the town, rolled and lit a cigarette. The flare of match revealed strong, regular features and a smile of satisfaction quirking the corners of his firm mouth. As before, Glenning could feel a peculiar sinister foreboding for the valley below him, yet there was a strange warmth mak-

ing his heart glow with anticipation. Laura Lanier was down there, too, and he knew that he could face any danger just for the sight of her again.

"It was quite a trip," he sighed wearily, "and I could do for some shut eye; but there will be little rest for me in this town for awhile yet, I'm afraid." He snuffed out his cigarette on the saddlehorn, and, leaving the two horses standing on their reins, walked out on the edge of the bluff and hunkered down with his back to a lone pine tree which stood majestically on the point. *I'll go over all my plans in detail before I move,* he decided. *I won't mention to Matthews about the buckshot he tried to palm off on me as a shipment of gold. I won't mention that Mr. Lanier and Jethro held up the man who did have the gold, and that I took the gold from them. No, that would be putting Laura's father on the spot and I can't do that. As for White-Eyes Sanderson and his two Texas pards—I don't really know for sure if they were waiting for me at Painted Rock where my relay horse was supposed to be. It pays to find out all you can about the trails you take before you start. That short-cut trail John Graham told me about was a life-saver, I guess. The joke is on both Matthews and Lanier and Jethro, though; they thought I was Matthews when I took that gold away from them. That leaves me in the clear—only thing, if it wasn't for that I would have an excuse to call on Laura. I could return their guns."*

GLENNING picked his way down the hill where there was no trail and finally came up behind the *Golden Horn Saloon.* He unsaddled the big gray and turned him loose in Matthews corral, hung Jethro's saddle over the fence then rode around to the livery stable. "Hi Graham," he called as he dismounted before the stable. "I reckon you're some surprised to see me?"



"Nothing that happens in Shack Town surprises me," Graham responded, "but I'm glad to see you're back. You managed your errand for Matthews okeh?"

"Okeh," Glenning admitted, "but not without difficulties. The question is, what will Matthews think when he sees me?"

"If anyone who ever gets in a game with Matthews could tell what Matthews was thinking, it would be worth fifty thousand dollars."

Glenning whistled with surprise. "Is Matthews that well off?"

"He was well-heeled when he came here," Graham went on, "and he's been cleaning up a hundred ways since he came here. The only thing is, that lately he's been unable to get his gold out, because of holdup men."

"So he told me," Glenning smiled wrily. "What do you know about a big man named Jethro?"

"Not much; no one does. When I had my stage line, one of the Pinkerton men made me a call and from his description of a man he was seeking, Jethro is the same one known to a few of us old-timers as the Wild Man of Music Mountain. Wears his hair long, wears buckskin clothes like Daniel Boone—probably a little bit crazy from living alone or just plain crazy. He's a good woodsman, and he can cover a trail like nobody's business. Probably a good trapper and might have been a buffalo hunter. I thought I saw a man answering his description

a few times; but it was always dark and I decided I was imagining things. Might be the poor fellow gets lonesome and—well, you know how it is. How come you're asking? He wasn't wanted by the Rangers down in Texas or something?"

"Not that I know of," Glenning responded matter-of-factly. Then, on reflection, "Say, where did you get the idea I was a Ranger?"

Graham shook his head. "I dunno; just a guess of mine, or maybe I heard it. You didn't tell anyone?"

"When I talked to Matthews I might have mentioned it as one of my qualifications for the Marshal's job," Glenning admitted.

"Might have?" Graham persisted. "What do you mean *might have?* Either you did or you didn't. Which was it?"

"Well, I did mention it," Glenning confessed. "I also pulled my gun on him to show that I could use it. I think I impressed him."

"And you came up here trailing those three renegades from Texas."

"No; I came here in an effort to avoid them. I didn't know they'd left Texas."

"Look here, son," Graham said shrewdly. "Things like that don't just happen; there's a reason for everything, if you take time to consider. I don't want to pry into your affairs. Maybe you really were scared of those three gunmen, but somehow it just don't add up. If you ran into men like that on the trail, and men like Jethro, with all that gold you were carrying—"

"Who said I was carrying gold?"

"Just added it up for myself," Graham said sagely. "It takes gold to bait a trap for men. I figured Matthews would plan an ambush for you at Painted Rock, that's why I told you about that short-cut trail."

GLENNING smiled warmly. "Thanks. Reckon I owe you my life for that. I by-passed Painted Rock, and I guess I avoided my three Texas friends by so doing. Of course, I don't know for sure if they were waiting for me but Matthews probably figured the same thing you did about them—maybe they think it themselves. I'll say this much; we've met before, and I don't under-rate White Eyes Sanderson. He has a rep of being one of the slickest gunmen in Texas; believe me, brother, that takes in a lot of territory!"

"You said it," Graham admitted. "I was down there once in what they call the Panhandle. Intended to go on down to San 'Tone but it was such a hell of a long ways I turned back. I hadn't gone far down across the plains when I ran smack dab into one of them big Texas winds. It was a dancin' an a twistin' and pullin' up trees and rocks and throwin' them around. I turned tail and headed north, it chased me quite a while, and I guess it would have caught me sure enough, if it had come at me straight instead of jumpin' around so much. Well, go ahead with your yarn about White Eyes."

"Well, I've got a trick with guns," Glenning responded without braggadocio. "You'll notice I wear my left-hand gun with the butt forward like a cross-draw man? Well, I can pull that gun with my left hand pretty fast; but no one expects such a move because of the way it's hung. It works good for a cross-draw, and of course my right hand gun is hung low and tied down. If a man needs a gun in a hurry he wants his hand close to a gun."

"That's just common-sense," Graham said agreeably, "but where does the trickery come in?"

"The trick is in filling my hand without the other fellow seeing me make a move," Glenning responded. "It's a kind of magic I've picked up. One second you see my hand perfectly empty; the next there's a gun in it looking you between the eyes. Magicians have been doing it for cen-

turies—it's the tendency of the eye to do what it's told.

"If I yell: *'Look out!'* you instinctively shrink and might even look back. If I throw my glance at something behind you, you can't help yourself. So while I do one thing with my left hand, or my right hand, I do something else with the other. The eye doesn't follow two things at the same time without special training; it might see, but the attention is not focused on what it sees."

While this conversation was taking place, Glenning was unsaddling, and rubbing down his horse with dextrous, sure hands. With his left hand he reached up, slapped Dandy on the rump and with his right hand, which held the curry-comb, he tossed the comb into a box by the stall. "See what I mean?" He asked. "You saw me toss the comb into that box. Now look!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Graham leaned forward holding the lantern aloft. "I'd a sworn I saw you toss the curry-comb into that box." With his left hand Glenning was currying the horse with a curry-comb.

Glenning laughed and tossed the curry-comb into the box. "You were right Graham," he laughed. "I *did* toss the curry comb into the box. What you didn't know was that I had another curry-comb in the waistband of my pants, and while your eye was watching the first comb, I pulled the second out with my left hand. That's the secret of my gun-magic."

"Come on in my office, son; I like to hear you talk," Graham invited admiringly. "I wasn't born yesterday, but you beat anything I ever met up with."

"Thanks," Glenning declined. "I've other fish to fry right now; but I'll tell you this much. I had a special assignment from the Governor of Texas to clean up the Brewster Gang. White-Eyes was one of that gang—he and his two pards. I joined up with the Rangers, then one day I walked into the Brewster Gang's hideout. I swaggered like I owned half of Texas and gave them three days to fold up their tents and move on. I did everything I could think of to get someone to draw but the way my guns are hung must have puzzled them; at least no one made a move. I even ordered a drink of whiskey and raised it high with my right hand before I made the switch. I got their attention with my glass then I pulled my gun. The next thing they knew they were looking into the bore of it. The trick must have fooled White-Eyes because he thinks I'm faster on the draw than he is; he saw it with his own eyes!"

"Do you think you really are faster?"

"I don't know," Glenning admitted; "I've done a heap of practicing, but it never pays to underestimate the other fellow. Anyhow, in about an hour—after I've had a bite to eat and a little conversation with Matthews—if I get myself appointed Marshal, I'm planing to do the trick again. If you'd like to see how I do it you might drop in for a look. I'd like to have you check me to see if I'm really fooling anybody."

"I'll be there!" Graham responded, "I wouldn't miss the show for a thousand in gold!"

●

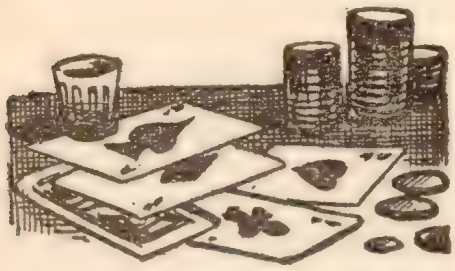
GLENNING walked boldly through the swinging doors of the *Golden Horn* and paused near the entrance a moment, adjusting his eyes to the light of the saloon. Matthews saw him immediately and tossed in his poker hand. Glenning stepped to the bar, ordered a drink and dallied with it a few minutes awaiting Matthews' usual indirect approach. Even with Glenning beside him. Matthews did not pretend to know him. "Well, what the hell do you want?" Matthews asked out of the side of his mouth.

"That job as Marshal of Shack Town you promised me," Larry responded mildly.

"I promised it on condition that you brought me back a receipt for my ten thousand dollars in gold," Matthews grated harshly.

"Nine thousand," Glenning corrected, one thousand was supposed to be mine, remember? Hadn't we better talk it over? I'll knock on your back door in five minutes and no tricks!"

"Don't bother," Matthews looked at him sharply, "come on. And don't forget, I've got twenty men I can call. Anything funny on your part and you'll never get away alive!" He led the way through the crowd to the room in the back of the saloon, lit a lamp and seated himself at the table. "You've got that receipt?"



Glenning strode to the window and pulled the shade down. "Why yes," he smiled grimly. "Here it is." He fumbled with a paper in his shirt pocket and when he had Matthews' attention he pulled a gun which he had tucked into the waist band of his pants with his left hand. Stepping forward ominously, he put the muzzle of the gun against Matthews' mouth. "Want me to read it to you?"

Matthews went white and his mouth popped open with surprise. "For gawd's sake Glenning, don't shoot! How—how did you do that?"

"It's just proof, Matthews, that the hand is quicker than the eye." Larry tossed the gun on the table contemptuously. "If you feel lucky, pick it up!"

Matthews regained his composure, quickly; he was a gambler of considerable skill. Glenning marvelled at the way the man controlled himself, but he did not let up in his bluff. Matthews, skillful in manipulating the cards, would no doubt believe that this was a trick. Naturally suspicious of trickery, he was the most dangerous person in Shack Town, for his keen eye would probably detect the method. For the present, however, before Matthews could perceive his movements, Glenning kept pushing him mentally. "Take a good look at that gun Matthews; ever see it before?"

"Why—why it looks like Slim Rogan's gun."

"I'm glad you recognize it," Larry responded blandly; "do me the favor of returning it to him. I picked it up along the Gunsmoke Trail on my way to Junction City; he must have dropped it. Now, how about that job?"

"The receipt," Matthews licked his lips nervously. "Where is the receipt?"

Glenning met Matthews' eyes in a hard look; then, as if daring Matthews to reach for the gun, he deliberately pulled out the makings and rolled a cigarette with elaborate casualness. He even held it up, so he could look at it with critical eye, then scratched a match and lit it.

Matthews was alert, watching every move with frantic dark eyes. He seemed to be expecting Glenning to demonstrate his gun-magic again, and was determined to find out how it was done; yet he was not curious enough to try to force a gun-play. The gambler kept his hands in sight, was scrupulously quiet, and he kept far enough away from the gun on the table to assure Glenning that he did not intend to grab for it.

LARRY TOOK a deep drag on his cigarette, pushed back his wide-brimmed hat, and blew a smoke-ring toward the ceiling. He was half-standing, half-sitting on the edge of the table; as if having nothing else to do, he began to play with the gun, idly. He fondled it as a child might fondle a toy, all the while pretending to ignore Matthews. "Had quite a trip,"

he finally drawled. "I reckon I earned a thousand dollars."

"I won't pay it," Matthews' voice was defiant. "You can push me just so far Glenning."

"I haven't *started* to push," Glenning smiled, cocking the gun so the cylinder turned. "Guess you thought this gun wasn't loaded." He pulled the hammer back and let it down, turning the gun so Matthews could see the bullets in the cylinder. "I've already collected the thousand; do I get that job or don't I?"

"Well." Matthews looked at the gun dubiously. "I guess you've got me where you want me."

"Now you're talking sense, Matthews. I'll be needing a badge and the keys to the jail, and since I'm just starting, you can shell out a month's wages in advance. My pay will be a hundred and fifty a month."

Matthews had opened a drawer of his rolled-top desk, which was in one corner of the room. He had the badge and some keys in his hands. "Wait a minute," he turned abruptly on Glenning. "When I pay out my money, I'm the Boss; people do what I say."

"Sure—sure," Larry agreed. "I'll do what you say, as long as it's conforming to my job; otherwise not." Glenning's eyes narrowed and he gave Matthews a hard look. He had held the gun pointed at the floor but now he tipped it upward slightly. "After all Matthews, it's your life—your money won't do you much good when you're under the sod. It's to your advantage to have law and order in Shack Town; you, more than anyone else, need someone to protect you. That will be my job—to look after the safety of the lives of the citizens."

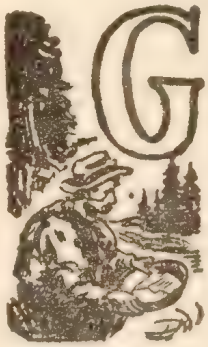
"You're quite right," Matthews agreed. "I hadn't thought of it that way; but you're quite right." He went to his safe, spun the dial and after a minute or two counted out a hundred and fifty dollars in bills. "You'll want to carry these in your money-belt no doubt," he said genially; "more convenient than carrying gold around."

"Thanks," Glenning thrust the money into his pocket, then laid the gun on the table. "And by the way, here's the receipt for that nine thousand in gold you mentioned."

Matthews did not show his surprise but he stood rooted to the spot for a full minute as he looked at the receipt from the Express Company. He certainly must have been surprised if not amazed, yet his outward expression was unchanged.

"Come on Matthews," Glenning gave a low laugh. "It's time I was introducing myself as the new Marshal of Shack Town!"

2



GLENNING stood with his back to the bar, a drink in his right hand. The badge on his vest gleamed significantly as he made a little gesture with his left hand causing the crowd to stand back. Matthews, also drinking, was standing but a few feet away, half-facing the crowd but half-turned toward Glenning. There was a sullen look on his face, yet he did not seem to see how he could avoid the situation Glenning was forcing upon him.

"I'm Larry Glenning from Texas," the ex-Ranger announced simply. "It has just been decided between Mr. Matthews here and myself that I will take the place of Cinders as Marshal of Shack Town. Any objections?"

He fixed the crowd with an impersonal, searching eye. He could see some of the men shift uneasily beneath his calm scrutiny, yet no one raised his voice. Several of the men looked questioningly at Matthews—but, except for his sullen demeanor,

Matthews was noncommittal. Graham was standing far back against the wall but in a position to watch; his face was expressionless.

"Most of the lawlessness and the disturbance of the peace," Glenning went on, "will be here in the *Golden Horn*. For that reason, Matthews will be paying my salary until such time as we can have an election and set up a taxing system. If you men are then dissatisfied with the way I'm running the law in Shack Town, and see fit to put someone else in my place—well, I wasn't too hungry when I came here, I guess I can make a living someplace else."

The crowd seemed to be warming toward him, now; smiles appeared on the faces of the men and some in back tried to shove forward causing the crowd to spread out more. Glenning noticed that White-Eyes Sanderson and the two other Texas Gunmen were not visible.

"While I'm marshal," Glenning glanced at Matthews, "I intend to see that everything in Shack Town is run fair and square; that will include the games here at the *Golden Horn*. Mr. Matthews wants me to assure you that from now on the *Golden Horn* will give you a square deal when you gamble, and the most in entertainment for your money. The girls are to be treated with respect and consideration; wasn't that the way you wanted it, Mr. Matthews?"

Matthews licked his lips nervously; he was caught in a trap in which he could do nothing but agree. "Glenning is right. The *Golden Horn* will give every man a fair break from now on. It has always been my policy to give every man a deal; unfortunately—well, any of my employees caught cheating will be discharged."

"And subject to the penalties of a Miner's Court," Larry added triumphantly. "Now as for my qualifications for the job I might say—" He shifted his whiskey glass from his right to his left hand and stepped toward Matthews. "That diamond, Mr. Matthews." He looked at the ring on the finger of Matthews' left hand intently and he could tell that everyone else in the room was looking at it too. Matthews frowned and looked at his ring also. "What's the matter with my ring?"

"Is it a genuine diamond?" Glenning asked in a low voice.

"Of course it's genuine," Matthews snapped; then his mouth fell open and he quickly gulped his drink to cover his amazement. Glenning had filled his right hand with a gun while everyone was looking at the diamond ring!

Glenning again turned toward the crowd and glanced curiously at the gun in his hand. It was pointed up, yet it would have been easy to tip it to firing position. "As I started to say when Mr. Matthews interrupted me," he went on, "here are my qualifications for my job. Any questions?"

It had all happened before their eyes; they did not see Glenning draw his gun, yet there it was in his hand. He read their surprise and amazement on their faces. Satisfied that he had convinced them of his skill, he holstered his gun and strode through the swinging doors into the night.

●

AS GLENNING stepped into the darkness however, the feeling of dread, of ominous foreboding came down upon him again. He had been keyed up while confronting the crowd, trying to photograph the faces and expressions of everyone, upon his memory. He had wanted to be able to separate possible friends from enemies, to determine who Matthews had working for him, and other possible criminals.

There was only one friend Larry could put confidence in, and that was the little old livery stable owner, Graham. On sober reflection though, Glenning had his doubts about Graham. Suppose Graham was playing a game, too? He tried to cast out the thought;

yet he was alone and lonely, many miles from anyone he knew and could trust. He regretted having told Graham about his trickery in pulling his gun, explaining away the magic of his draw; yet Glenning knew that he was almost compelled to put confidence in someone.

He tried to compare this situation with situations in his past, and remembered when he had faced down the Brewster Gang. His life had not seemed so important, then; he hadn't cared about risking it. He had believed that reckless courage, dashing in and muddling through while other elements were off-guard, was the best way to succeed. It had worked for Larry before, and up until now he had believed it would work for him again.

But when Glenning had faced the Brewster Gang, he was a member of the terrible and famous Texas Rangers, that fact alone had made him feel invincible. Now, clothed only with the dubious authority of a marshal's badge given to him by a known crooked gambler—who was running the town by the might of his hired gunmen—Glenning realized his precarious position. He had not intended to risk the hatred of his employer in the beginning; but Larry felt that Matthews already hated him with the deadly hatred which goes beyond reason. It was such a hatred as will put to naught a man's lust for wealth and the love for his own life.

In that moment when Matthews had warned a crowd that he would kill the man who laid a hand on Laura Lanier, the gambler had revealed the true state of his feelings. Much older than Larry, and Laura also, Matthews had instinctively recognized in Glenning a rival worthy of his metal.

And as Glenning opened the front door of the jail and lit the lamp inside of the place which was to be his office and abode, it came to him suddenly why he was so much concerned about his life. His meeting with Laura Lanier had given his life a new significance, a new direction.

"Why I scarcely know the girl," he argued with himself. *"A man is a fool to get himself all worked up over a woman he has only met once and talked to less than an hour."*

Nevertheless, he made a bundle of some blankets, and rolled them to appear as a person, and laid it on the bunk. With another blanket he crawled into a corner. *"Like a cowardly coyote,"* he said to himself. *"If Laura knew what I'm doing to be able to keep my precious life, she certainly wouldn't find much about me to be in love with. A hell of a situation when the marshal of a town has to crawl into a corner like a scared animal, to keep from being potted through the open window. The day will come, though, when everyone can sleep with his windows open without fear. I'll make the place safe for women and kids!"*

•

GLENNING slept as one of the dead, for his long ride had been exhausting; yet when he heard the slight scraping sound along the building he was instantly awake. His closeness to the wall, and his position on the floor, made it possible for him to hear the sounds of footsteps or the movement of a body scarcely a foot from his head. Scarcely breathing; every nerve tense; his hand on his gun; he waited.

A shadow appeared at the window—then a gun was thrust into the

opening pointed at the shape on the bunk. It exploded again and again, Glenning held fire, but he was on his feet now, cautiously approaching the open window. After the shooting an ominous silence settled over the place. Seconds became minutes, and minutes hours, as he waited; he was about to peer out the open window when a head was thrust inside, then the arms and shoulders appeared. When the man was more than half-way over the sill Larry brought his gun-barrel down on the back of the man's head. There was a slight groan then the man lay still.

Quickly, Glenning frisked the man in the dark, wondering who it might be. He found a long knife and the gun in the man's holster. These he removed; then, as quickly as possible, he dragged the fellow into one of the cells and locked the iron door. In his socks, Larry moved like a ghost in the darkness and let himself out the back door. He waited in the shadows for a few minutes then scouted the premises. Tied to the horse corral in the rear of the jail he found the man's horse. "He came alone," Glenning murmured with satisfaction. "Well, I guess I might as well go see what I've got in my trap."

Glenning went inside, closed the window and covered it with a blanket, then he lit the lamp and looked at his prisoner. The man was sitting up now, just recovering from the blow on his head. He looked up with slightly-glazed, dark eyes as Larry approached. "Well Blackie," Glenning said, "the jig is up."

"How did you do it?" Blackie Bulock asked, staggering to his feet. "I—I thought I had you dead center."

GLENNING smiled grimly, unlocked the cell door, reached down and picked up Blackie's hat and handed it to him. "I can do a lot of things Blackie. I've got a talent for such things. I'm surprised to think White-Eyes Sanderson, the fastest gunman in Texas would send a man like you or Pete Skink to do a job for him. Sit down Blackie and tell me how it happened. Where are White-Eyes and Pete now?"

"Go ahead and shoot me," Blackie snarled, his tobacco stained teeth showing, "I won't talk."

"My stock would go up considerably in Shack Town if I drilled you dead center," Larry reminded him. "Talk, damn you, why did you do it?"

"You're a Ranger," Blackie evaded; "I hate Rangers."

"But I'm not a Ranger any more," Glenning said, gently. "I resigned my commission when I left Texas. Why didn't White-Eyes come for me himself; is he afraid?"

"We drew straws," Blackie admitted. "I got the short straw, Pete Skink got the next one. Pete will get you—he won't make any noise, he'll use a knife!" Blackie's Indian-like face seemed to light up with satisfaction at the thought, his teeth showed in a malevolent grin, and he made a little movement with his hand to indicate cutting a man's throat.

Larry shuddered. He could almost feel the knife; it made little shivers crawl up and down his back. "You're pretty handy with a knife yourself, Blackie, why didn't *you* try it with a knife?"

"Blackie don't like Senor Ranger's magic gun," the man said candidly; "Blackie don't like rope about neck, either. You run me out of Texas. White-Eyes say we kill you then go back to Texas and live like kings. I like to live like king in Texas."

"Are you a Mexican or an Indian, Blackie?"

"Apache father, Mexican mother, American Uncle."

"Where does the 'Uncle' part come into it?" Glenning persisted curiously.

"You don't know 'Uncle Sam'?" Blackie asked, his dark eyes suddenly dancing with humor. "He rich man, Uncle Sam. Own a lot of property, lots of gold—all we have to do is ask for it!"

"Uncle Sam have long arm," Larry

responded, assuming the same sort of speech as Blackie. "Uncle Sam don't like people who ask for his money with a gun—especially money he carries in the mail. Did White-Eyes say it was all right to take Uncle Sam's money?"

"I make joke," the other responded, "Blackie think rich uncle nice idea. Now what you do with me? White-Eyes say not bungle this job or you hang me. Senor Ranger, why you knock off *mia cabesa?* Why you no shoot? Quicker that way."

LARRY grinned, rolled a cigarette, then handed Blackie the makings. He had seen many men like Blackie along the border—half breed Mexican Indians, simple in their way of thinking and corrupted by white men, yet, they were loyal and possessed many admirable traits of character. "I'm going to turn you loose, Blackie. I have no grudge against you even though you tried to kill me. White-Eyes is to blame and I guess he thinks I'm after him. I'm not; I wish you'd go tell him to get out of the country. There's a lot better places than this."

"White-Eyes say he not run from you," Blackie responded, scowling thoughtfully. "White-Eyes beat you to draw and shoot you dead."

"Listen, Blackie," Glenning leaned forward and fixed the other with a hard eye. "White-Eyes knows he can't knows it; but I don't count. Matthews is out to get White-Eyes; he has twenty men, and if White-Eyes shows up in Shack Town again they'll get him, sure—and you and Pete Skink with him. I'm giving you a chance to save your own hide, Blackie—next time you try anything I'll plug you."

He removed the cartridges from Blackie's gun and laid it on the table in front of the other. Then he took the blanket from the window, opened it, and motioned to Blackie to leave that way.

Blackie's face blanched slightly but he did not move. He looked at his gun on the table but did not touch it, then he glanced at the open window. Finally his eyes looked into Glenning's amused brown ones. "You no shoot me?"

Larry was slightly puzzled for a moment, then he gave a low laugh. He had heard tales from below the border of men imprisoned. The cell door would be left open—apparently by accident—or some other negligence would make escape appear easy. As soon as the prisoner attempted it, however, he was shot.

"Go ahead Blackie; this isn't Mexico. I won't shoot you and you can't shoot me with an empty gun. Out the window, and you can tell Pete Skink that I'm keeping your knife. If he comes around me I'll give him a taste of his own medicine. I'll even meet him in the open, take a neckerchief between my teeth with him, and fight it out with knives if he feels lucky."

"You no shoot me in the back?" Blackie persisted, still doubtful.

"Here," Glenning said sharply as he picked up Blackie's gun and thrust it into the man's holster. "Get gone!" He seized Blackie by the collar jerking him to his feet and shoved him toward the window. "I'll make it easier for you." He blew out the light; under the cover of darkness, Blackie dived through the open window and the sound of his running feet quickly receded into the night.

3

THE NEXT morning, when he went to the livery stable to look after Dandy. Glenning told John Graham his troubles and appealed to the old man for help. "So I let Blackie go," he concluded, "hoping White-Eyes will de-

cide to ride on out of the country. I'm about of the opinion that I can bring Shep Matthews around to an honest way of living."

Graham puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. "I doubt if you can change him. What's born in the bone is bound to come out in the flesh. Matthews was born crooked as a hound's hind leg; try to straighten him out and he can't move."

"But being a gambler, and in a way, a business-man," Glenning argued, "he might be brought around to my point of view. How many businessmen would be perfectly honest if it wasn't for some sort of laws? I aim to clean out the crime in Shack Town."

"After seeing you make your play last night," Graham encouraged, "if anyone can do it, I'd say you can. That gun-play was well done; but when it actually comes down to a stand and draw in front of witnesses—when your real speed is the important thing, how do you think you'll stack up? Deception is all right in its place; but sooner or later I've a sneaking idea you'll have to shoot it out with White-Eyes Sanderson."

Glenning licked his lips nervously contemplating the idea. "Yes, I guess you're right; seems like fate."

"A gunman like White-Eyes is always vain," Graham went on. "I'm some older than you, and I've seen some real gunmen in my time. Fear makes men crazy, but honest fear is not lack of courage. From my observation, the man who fears you may be far more dangerous than one who does not. Then, too, a gun-crazy galoot like White-Eyes will never be satisfied until he has it out with you. He *might* have been afraid when he left Texas—*but look out for a man who turns around to fight after he quits running!*"

GLENNING felt depressed and gloomy. He looked thoughtfully at the floor and shuffled his scuffed boots. "Looks like I bit off at least three men's job. Last night after I let Blackie go I took a blanket and slept in the brush down by the river. I didn't sleep too well—kept waking up dreaming Pete Skink was about to slip a knife across my throat. Blackie put three bullets in that blanket I had rolled up as a dummy on my bunk. I left the window open purposely and what do you think I found when I got back this morning?"

"A dead man?" Graham looked up with pixy-like mischief in his face.

Larry grinned in spite of himself. "No, but it was enough to give me the willies. Either Blackie came back and took two more shots at me—which ain't likely—or someone else did. I found five bullet-holes in the blanket this morning—Blackie only shot three times!"

"No one man can beat a combination like you're up against," Graham said candidly. "You've got Matthews against you with several hired gun-men who would shoot you in the back. Then there are some others who probably think you're working hand-in-glove with Matthews—others who hate Matthews' guts. They might knock you off for that reason. Then there are a lot of little petty crooks hanging around, who wouldn't overlook a chance if they thought you had a little money on you. I hate to see you do it, because Shack Town really needs an honest marshal, but Glenning, you just can't win. The best thing for you to do is fork that Dandy horse of yours and lite out."

"The trouble is," Glenning clenched and unclenched his fist, "I've got to sleep. I can't hit for the brush every night—I'd be a laughing-stock and I can't afford to hire someone to watch while I sleep. About the only way I

can see to get any rest and stay alive is to get a good dog. Know anyone who has one?"

Graham was hopeful. "Might be able to pick up a hound of some kind over at Fort Webster, Probably come high though—maybe a hundred dollars or so."

"Could you get loose long enough to ride over and see?" Larry urged desperately.

"Got the Pepper boy—Johnny Pepper, who sometimes works for me if I want to leave for a day or so," Graham responded. "A good boy, Johnny—has a pretty hard time making a go of it but he's a good kid and willing to work."

Larry arose abruptly and handed Graham a hundred dollars. "Buy me the best dog you can. If he costs more, I'll pay the difference if you think he's really good. Go get Johnny and I'll talk with him; if there's anything I can do to help, you can depend on me."

Graham made a little gesture. "Here he comes, now. Always comes around about this time....Johnny, this is the new marshal of Shack Town, Larry Glenning."

The tow-headed. slightly-freckled boy of about twelve grinned broadly. "I've been looking all over hell for you," he said. "Lady gave me a dollar to deliver this letter to you."

Glenning glanced briefly at the letter and thrust it into his pocket. "Thanks, Johnny," he said briefly trying to conceal his sudden excitement. "See you later, Graham." He turned to the door then suddenly whirled, reached into his pocket and held out a silver dollar to Johnny. "Here's another dollar."

"Oh gee! Thanks!" Johnny gasped with surprise.

But Glenning was already striding through the door and up the street toward his office. He wanted to run and prance like a happy colt, but restrained himself to a fast walk. It would not do for anyone to see the marshal of Shack Town running, unless there was apparent reason to run.

IN THE privacy of his office Larry opened the letter, an eager, hopeful light in his brown eyes. Then as he read, a frown puckered his brow. *Because of what you did for me I feel obligated to warn you,* he read. *Jethro thinks you are a Pinkerton man and intends to kill you. Don't try to see me as it will cause trouble between me and my father. Laura.*

"Well, anyhow," Glenning said to himself after a minute of gloomy thought, "she thinks enough of me to want me to live."

Glenning took the two guns and gun-belts which he had taken from Lanier and Jethro at the scene of the holdup, and went back to the livery stable. As he had hoped, Graham had already gone. "Johnny," he said to the boy, "would you like to earn another dollar?"

"Whatever you say, Mr. Glenning," the boy replied admiringly, "but you don't hafta give me another dollar; all you gotta do is just ask."

"Thanks, Johnny," Glenning smiled. "I appreciate your confidence and willingness. At the rate I'm spending my money, it won't be long before I'll be broke and I may have to call on you for help. While I've got the money, I'd rather pay you for all favors; after all, any man's time is worth something."

Glenning put the guns and belts into a sack. "Now get this straight; Johnny; don't say a thing more than what I tell you. Do you know where the lady lived who gave you the letter?"

"Sure," Johnny responded eagerly; "everyone does."

"Well, that's fine," Larry handed the boy the dollar. "Now take this bag down to her house and give it to her. Just tell her to give it to her father; he'll know who sent it. If she asks about me, tell her I think she's the prettiest girl I ever saw and that

I claim to be a good judge of horseflesh and women."

"Gee whiz, Mr. Glenning, are you in love with her, too?"

"Everyone in Shack Town is, ain't they?" Larry evaded.

"If they ain't, they ought to be," Johnny agreed as he slung the sack over his shoulder; "if I was ten years older I could go for her myself!"

●

Glenning saddled Dandy and rode up the gulch looking over the diggings. Some of the men gave him a quick glance then turned to their work at sluice box or cradle. He felt rebuffed and wondered how he could get into the good graces of the men. One oldster gave him an especially dirty look. Glenning paused before him, looped a long leg around the saddle horn and rolled a cigarette. "Makin' any gold?"

"Naw," came the curt response. "I'm just doing this for exercise. My stomach is bad from drinking Matthews' rot-gut whiskey."

"Why don't you do something about that?"

"About what? the oldster looked up sharply.

"About the quality of the whiskey." Glenning responded, looking intently at the end of his cigarette. "If you men would refuse to drink nothing but the best, Matthews would bring in only the best. I've heard tell they put plugs of tobacco in the bottom of the barrel to make it stronger; ever tasted any whiskey that tasted like tobacco?"

"After the second drink I don't remember what it tastes like," said the oldster. "Good day to you, sir."

"Say mister," Glenning slid from his horse and stepped lightly forward, "you've got me all wrong. I'm here to help you men; I'm bringing law and order to Shack Town!"

"Law and order?" The oldster said cuttingly. "You get your pay from Matthews don't you? Well go back and tell it to Matthews, you bootlicker!"

"Wait a minute," Larry said harshly, "you're stepping on my toes! Do I look like a bootlicker?"

The old man scratched his bald head and studied Larry with sharp, blue eyes. "Well now that I take a good look at yuh, don't believe yuh do."

"Thanks," Glenning grinned and thrust out his hand.

"Elkins is my name." The oldster shook Glenning's hand with a strong grip. "Yuh don't appear to be the kind who would work for Matthews very long; don't happen to be a U.S. Marshal do yuh?"

"I'm not exactly what I seem, oldtimer," Glenning evaded, "and I'll appreciate your support. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open." He mounted and rode thoughtfully on up the gulch.

"By golly," he said to himself. "That's an idea! Maybe that's just the job for me. I wonder now. How does a man get a job as a United States Marshal?"

AS HE RODE, Larry studied the faces of the men but did not talk to any of them. Passing the diggings, he went on up the gulch, cut back over the ridge and watched them at their work from a high point above. In his mind he had a picture of each man and his individual surroundings. Some of them were apparently not working very hard. *Matthews' men,* he decided, *or petty crooks just pretending to be digging gold. They make their living doing something else. Finding out what it is might be very interesting!*

That afternoon he found some good grass, picketed his horse, and made a comfortable bed of pine needles. He lay down and gazed up through the overhanging cover of the pines at the serene blueness of the sky. A cedar bird chirped; a squirrel chattered, then all was quiet. *I'll write the Governor of Texas,* he resolved. *Maybe he can help me get to a U. S. Marshal.* Larry sighed wearily and the face of

Laura Lanier was vivid in his mind as he drifted off to sleep.

●

The *Golden Horn* was crowded when Glenning entered in the evening. Two or three of the miners offered to buy him a drink, but he declined, courteously. "I'm on duty, now; when I've got Shack Town tamed down some, maybe I'll take a day off and have a drink with you."

Farther down the bar, a burly bearded tough stepped back from the bar. "Me," he bellowed pounding his chest. "Look at me! I can whip any man in this whole damn town including lily-livered marshals! How about it, Glenning—are you as handy with your dukes as yuh are with your guns?"

"Handier," Glenning smiled as he approached the man, "but I don't like to fight—that is, not with my fists. I bruise easy and I can't stand pain." He made as if to pass the man by, then, as the other made a step forward to seize him, Glenning whirled. "However," and there was a metallic ring to his voice, "we've got a little game down on the Border that's a sure test of a man's nerve."

He pulled off his neckerchief and gave it a flip. "We do it this way; you take a corner of this neckerchief. I take a corner, we fight it out with knives!" As he said the last word, the long knife which Buell had carried was in his hand as if by magic and the point of the blade was but an inch from the tough's throat. "What do you say mister, would you like to try your luck with knives? You needn't get cut; the first one to let cut; the first one to let go of the neckerchief loses!"

The man's bearded face went pale and his eyes bugged out of his head frantically. They fixed themselves in terror on Matthews who approached rapidly. "You asked for it, Grissom," he snarled furiously. "why don't you accommodate the man?"

"I—I never bargained f-for—" Grissom licked his lips.

"Shut up!" Matthews stepped forward in rage and slapped the bearded face. "Shut up and get out!"

Grissom, completely cowed, shuffled drunkenly out of the saloon. Larry stepped back, removed his hat with a flourish, and bowed from the waist to the gambler. "Thank you, Mr. Matthews," he said in mock gallantry. "I believe you saved me from having my throat cut!"

There was a roar of laughter and Matthews waved his arm, to cover his confusion and embarrassment. "Have a drink everybody: Drinks are on the house!" Everyone crowded to the bar but Glenning, who stood slightly aloof watching; he was searching the faces and wondering what sort of trick Matthews would try next.

4

HAVING slept during the day, Glenning was prepared to stay awake all night. He mixed with the crowd at the *Golden Horn,* restraining the most boisterous with a word. Three of them he sent home with friends and about midnight he left and went to the jail. As before, he did not sleep in his bunk but settled down in a corner on a blanket. The window was open and the dummy figure lay on the bunk. *If White Eyes sends Pete Skink after me with a knife,* Glenning resolved, *I won't fool around. Knives give me the willies, especially in the dark.*

But time passed, and in spite of his intention to stay awake, Glenning dozed off. He awakened with a start when he heard a pounding on the front door of the jail. "Hey Glenning, open up!" It was Matthews' voice.

Warily, in his sock feet, Glenning moved toward the window; after peering out cautiously, he covered it with

a blanket. He lit the lamp but set it on the floor so it would not be too revealing. Then he approached the front door, his gun cocked and ready. Larry stayed close to the wall until he came to the front window and peered out. Five or six men were with Matthews, in a group behind him.

Glenning unlocked the front door and opened it a crack. "Come on in Matthews, and come alone. Tell your men to wait where they are."

"I've been robbed," Matthews announced as he strode to the table and seated himself, his hands above the surface to allay suspicion.

"You mean the *Golden Horn* was held up?" Larry seated himself across from Matthews, laying his gun on the table within easy reach.

"That's right," Matthews responded sharply. "Three masked men with black masks over their faces came in, right after you left."

"Tell me all about it," Glenning encouraged, "and don't miss any details."

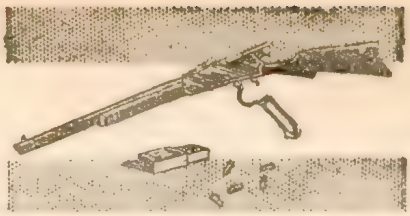
"They lined all the customers up along one wall," Matthews went on. "Two of them were about average height but one of them was tall and slim."

"Several tall, slim fellows here," Glenning reminded casually.

MATTHEWS made a little impatient gesture. Glenning could not see his face clearly; but if there was any trickery in the man about this, he must make him give himself away now. "Might have been almost anybody held you up."

"These men knew what they were doing," Matthews persisted; "they acted like hold-ups was right in their line of work. The tall, slim fellow never wasted a move. It was all carefully planned, and just anyone around here can't plan a hold-up to come off so smooth. It takes brains to figure out all the moves like that."

"Guess you're right, Matthews," Glenning agreed casually. "Go on with



your story; how did the slim gent proceed?"

"He had one man at the front door and one at the back while he went around to all the games and took up all the cash—the wheel, the poker games—cleaned out everything. Then he made me go back in the back room and open my safe. Well, that's about it."

"About how much money did they get away with?"

"Around six thousand," Matthews seemed excited. "They cleaned me out; I won't be able to do business if you don't get that money back!"

"That would be a shame," Glenning said drily. "It would really be a calamity if the *Golden Horn* had to shut down for a day or two while you sent out for money to operate."

"But my payroll goes on," Matthews persisted. "I'm paying you to be marshal of Shack Town. What are you going to do?"

"By the way," Larry said sharply, "what did *you* do about the hold-up? You've got twenty men working for you. Do you mean to tell me you just sat there and let them walk away with your money? You could at least have looked out to see which way they went."

Matthews' irritation was more than apparent, now. "They headed for the hills. I'm sure of it, and my men are not gunmen. They've seen White-Eyes Sanderson shoot."

Glenning yawned, "Oh, yes, he shot Cinders in a stand-and-draw right in broad daylight. I forgot. So you think it was White-Eyes Sanderson and his two pards who held you up?"

"What do you think?"

"Sounds like their handiwork," Glenning admitted. "Well, good night, Mr. Matthews. As soon as it gets day

light I'll scout around and pick up their trail. No use trying to follow a trail in the dark. You go on home, now, get a good night's sleep and don't worry. If White-Eyes took your money I'll get it back for you."

"If you do, there's a thousand in it for you," Matthews offered.

"That's right generous of you, Mr. Matthews." Larry smiled grimly in the darkness as he let the gambler out the front door to rejoin his men. "If I live long enough, I'll be needing that money to run my office. It looks like law and order in Shack Town is going to be rather expensive!"

GLENNING blew out the light and sat at the table facing the open window waiting. *I thought I'd hit this town like a Texas Tornado,* he mused. *But so far, all I've done is play cat and mouse. The only thing is, I thought I was the cat; but I'm not so sure but maybe I'm the mouse.*

Glenning had studied many books, including those by a certain Professor Igoe, who claimed that you could judge the criminal type by the shapes of their heads. Larry had believed this until he found many "criminal types" to be honest men and many apparently honest men to be criminals. The idea that certain people will do certain things under certain circumstances seemed logical enough, however; and supposing that White-Eyes Sanderson, Buell and Snide had robbed Matthews, Larry tried to determine what White-Eyes might be expected to do.

Buell let the cat out of the bag; Pete Snide is like a snake, and he can wiggle through that window there and be on the inside without me being able to see him. I can almost feel him in the room right now. That's the hell of it, going up against a gent with a knife; it makes a man's guts crawl and his nerves get jumpy. He'll empty his gun at the least sound or passing shadow—then the knifer steps in and swish—your throat is cut!

Was that someone coming, outside? Larry strained his ears and a little shiver crawled up and down his spine. He could feel the hair rising on top of his head. He raised the gun and pointed it at the window, almost unnerved and jumpy enough to shoot at the first appearance of a head above the window sill.

I was going to let him crawl inside and stick his knife in that dummy on my bunk; but I don't know if I've got the nerve to go through with it. I reckon I'll have to, though. I'll have to let Snide come on inside in order to knock him out. Yes... I'll have to do that or I can't get him to lead me to their hideout.

The suspense of waiting brought a knot into Glenning's stomach and the thought of a knife at his throat made his flesh crawl. He raised the gun and covered the open window. There it was again, the sound of approaching footsteps. "Damn you Snide," he whispered hoarsely, "stick your head over that window sill and I'll blow it off!"

"Mr. Glenning," came a woman's voice from the darkness. "Oh, Mr. Glenning. Are you here, Mr. Glenning?"

"Laura!" Glenning gasped. "For gawd's sake Laura, is that you?"

"Yes, Mr. Glenning," she sounded relieved. "I—I must talk with you!"

"Come close to the window," he ordered, "and I'll help you inside. Jump! Duck your head; that's right. There you are!"

For a moment they stood there, the wonder of each other's nearness making them mute. Glenning could feel her body pressing close against him as if for protection. He felt her hand trembling on his arm. "What is it Laura?"

"It's a trap to kill you," Laura gasped out. "Matthews' own men held up the *Golden Horn.* You must hurry and stop my father; he and Jethro are going to try to hold up Matthews' men."

"How did you find out all this?"

"I heard them talking," she went on hurriedly. "A man named Slim told

Father; they're in it together, somehow. I think Slim is one of Matthews' men."

Glenning perceived the plan in a flash. "It all adds up, but how did they intend to kill me?"

"The three hold-up men are to lure you into the hills and ambush you. It's supposed to look as if someone called White-Eyes did the job. Oh Larry, I'm so afraid for Father; I don't like this at all."

"If it's all a frame-up with Slim and your Father, he will be in little danger, Laura," Glenning soothed. "I'll do what I can to break it up."

He allowed his lips to brush her hair; then, as she made no resistence, he pulled her into his arms and crushed her to him. When his lips found hers he marvelled at the warmth of her response. For a moment, the heady effect of that kiss drove out all thought of danger.

He knew in that moment that he could never leave Shack Town as long as she was there.

●

Feeling a little guilty in not doing exactly as the girl had wanted him to, Larry waited in the brush near the big cottonwood tree. He had arrived just in time to see the three riders leave with their hands in the air; as in the preceding situation, there was Lanier and Jethro with the loot standing in the shadows.

"All right, Lanier," Glenning said crisply, in close imitation of Matthews' voice. "Freeze! I've got you both covered. Drop that bag and head for home with your hands in the air. I'm getting tired of your interfering with my plans; next time I won't give you another chance—I'll shoot. Now get!"

The shorter of the two men, clearly revealed against the skyline, made as if to draw his gun. "You cheated me Matthews; you ruined my life. I aim to get my money back or die in the attempt."

"Hold it Lanier!" Glenning said harshly, though there was a prayer in his heart. "I'd hate to have to make an orphan of your daughter!"

The man seemed to come to his senses; he raised his hands, turned his back and spoke to his companion. "Come on, Jethro, I guess he's outsmarted us again."

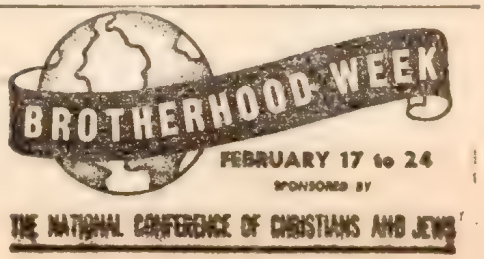
Glenning watched them out of sight, then picked up the bag. Keeping to the shadows, he headed for the rear of the *Golden Horn. So far, so good,* he thought with satisfaction; *I've still got them thinking I'm Matthews, and Shep don't know for sure who has been holding him up. Of course Slim Rogan won't tell. I wonder though—does Matthews suspect Slim of double-crossing him? If he does, I'd hate to be in Slim's place. Matthews is the kind who would spend his last dime to get even with a double-crosser!*

●

THERE WAS a light in the rear room of the *Golden Horn* and Glenning kept to the shadows. He wondered what was taking place inside, and was about to move up where he might hear some of the conversation, when the door opened.

"You've muddled it again Slim," Matthews said ominously. "I warn you, don't muddle it again. Go on out of town like we planned. Glenning need not know you haven't got the money. Come daylight he'll pick up your trail; head for Apache Pass and you know what to do!"

"Okeh, Chief," Slim agreed, "leave it to me." He started away then whirled. "Say, Matthews—after we



bump off Glenning, how about giving me the job as marshal of Shack Town?"

"We'll talk about that when you bring back Glenning's ears." Matthews snapped. "If you come back!"

Larry watched Slim Rogan disappear in the darkness, then waited until Matthews put out the light. Cautiously he approached the back door and gave three knocks. "That you Slim?" Matthews asked; "what the hell do you want now?"

"No, Matthew, it's Glenning; come out and don't make a light."

"Glenning?" Matthews' voice sounded suspicious, if not a little bit frightened. "What do you want?"

"I've got your money here for you," Larry said. "I hated to disturb you while you're sleeping, but I thought it would be safer in your safe."

"You say you've got my money?" Matthews asked from the other side of the door. "Well now, that's fine." He unlocked the door. "Just put it inside the door."

The arrangement suited Glenning perfectly; he did not relish the thought of going inside to have Matthews shoot him down at point-blank range. He opened the door a crack and tossed in the bag.

"I don't know how much is there," Larry explained. "I didn't have time to count it; but it's all the money that was taken except the thousand dollar reward."

"You mean you're going to claim that reward?" Matthews demanded angrily. "I didn't mean—

"I didn't think you meant it," Glenning responded grimly, "but when a man tells me something I expect him to keep his word. It was right generous of you, Mr. Matthews, in offering a thousand dollar reward; it will come in mighty handy in running my office. When I begin making arrests in Shack Town, we may even need a new jail; then, too, it costs right smart to feed the prisoners."

Matthews seemed to have regained his self control. "All right, you've won again; but don't crowd me too far. I'll stand just so much."

"You can make it light on yourself Matthews," Glenning insinuated. "And I can help you a lot if you'll go along."

"How's that?" Matthews demanded.

"Just play it straight Matthews," Larry advised. "All I ask you to do, is just play it straight!"

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LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

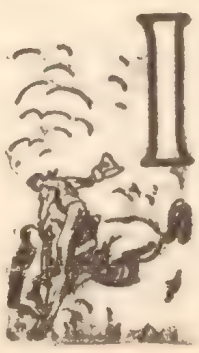
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 24th day of September, 1951. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1952). (SEAL)

Morg was a wild one, and always looking for trouble...

BOOTHILL LOVER

By Gene Austin

"So long as my sister wants you, I've got to lay off you, Larkin. But maybe the time will come when she's no longer interested—then you won't have her skirts to hide behind, and I'll even up our score!"



IN FIVE YEARS, Jack Larkin had just about forgotten about Morg Parsons. He didn't think much about him, even when he started going around with Hetty Parsons. And it had slipped his mind, in those

years of hard working and hard planning, that Morg had said, "When I get out of the calaboose, Larkin, you're goin' to wish to hell you hadn't got trigger-fever. Remember that."

When Larkin rode into town on a sorrel one June morning, and stopped at the *Roarin' Tap* saloon for a short one, he had to look twice before he recognized the man jackknifed over the bar. But then it all came back, and his hand went unconsciously toward his right hip, even though he'd long ago quit packing a Colt.

Morg straightened up like he'd rehearsed it a hundred times, but the hate on his face was genuine. Larkin felt cold, grey eyes flicking over him like knife-thrusts, taking in the dust in the folds of his levis, the horny hands, and the slight stoop in the broad shoulders. Work brands. Larkin was proud of them.

"Well, you look like you been livin' with the cows," Morg said; "I ain't surprised."

Larkin let his breath out slowly, and motioned for the barkeep to draw a beer. "You must have been askin' around about me, Morg," he said. "I take it you don't approve of ranchers."

Morg snorted. "Rancher, hell! The way I hear it, you're so small your stock sleeps right in the house with you. Rancher, hell!" He twisted around and finished his shot. "Yeh, I been askin', Larkin; think you're pretty clever, don't you?"

Larkin smiled. "What about?"

Morg's eyebrows made a bushy, angry V over his eyes. "About Hetty. Took up with her, didn't you? Just like a rat like you to try and save his dirty hide behind a woman's skirt."

Larkin's eyes went cold. "What kind of talk is that?"

"Plain talk," Parsons growled. "You know I can't touch you as long as Hetty's got a case on you; the old man wouldn't like that, and I'm in bad enough all ready."

Morg polished off another shot and smacked his lips. He came closer and Larkin could smell the sweat that was standing out over his face. I ain't forgot, Larkin," Morg said; "I ain't forgot a damn thing. An' I'll find a way to get around your yellow tricks. You can look for it."

He shoved out through the batwing doors, and Larkin's hand slid to the handle of his beer-mug. His forehead curled with anger at Morg's accusation. When he'd fallen in love with Hetty—Morg's sister by adoption—he hadn't considered anything except he wanted her in the worst way. And old Dan Parsons, the town's leading business man, had not seemed adverse to him.

Hetty was his only actual child. When his wife had died at her birth, he became inconsolable—not only because he'd worshipped her, but because she'd never had a son to take up things when he died. He was determined not to marry again; but when, one day, he came upon a prairie waif without a home, Dan brought him back and called him Morg Parsons.

Larkin had grown up with Morg; he remembered that, even as a button, Morg had never shown much appreciation for old Dan's kindness and faith. He was always getting into trouble, always trying to drag Larkin in along with him.

Larkin had gone along in a lot of it, but when they grew older Morg's pranks were no longer childish. They had both reached legal age, when, one night after riding in from a late dance in another town, Morg had suggested the thing that started it all.

●

IT HAD BEEN a pitch dark night, Larkin remembered clearly. As they rode into town, only a single light was to be seen—in the Cattleman's Bank, where aged Ben Hardin was bent over the books. From across the street they could see the safe door, slightly ajar.

"Let's get rich quick," Morg said hoarsely; "no use waitin' for my old man to die."

"You loco fool, what're you thinkin' of?"

"I'll show you," Morg said; "you wait here and cover me in case anybody pops up."

Morg dismounted and started for the bank, Larkin called low, "Wait a minute, you fool! Don't do it!"

"Shut up," Morg whispered back. "Want the whole town to wake up? You just cover me."

Then Morg was snaking through the darkness and easing the bank door latch up while Larkin sat there petrified, his heart pounding wildly, his whole body wanting to scream, "No, no!" Morg sneaked in and felled old man Hardin with a crushing gun blow on the head.

The rest of it had happened so quickly that it had become blurred in Larkin's consciousness. Morg was rifling the safe; he was trying to dismount, to run and prevent it—and a teller appeared in the bank from some back room.

Morg was running out the door, the teller grabbing a gun off a shelf and shouting bloody murder. Morg was trying to mount, shouting, "Shoot him, shoot him!" Larkin sat there, unable to move and completely horrified at what Morg expected him to do.

Then the teller got to the door and shot Morg off his horse.

At the trial, Morg got five years and Larkin was released because Roarin' Tap people had seen enough of the relationship between him and Morg to believe him when he swore he'd had nothing to do with it.

Morg felt differently; to him Larkin had turned yellow at the last minute. He hated Jack—not only for being responsible for his capture and disgrace but all the more because he wasn't helping take the rap.

Larkin remembered going in to see him after the trial, and Morg's snarling threats came back with bone-chilling clearness.

●

HE FINISHED his beer, swearing softly. He was not afraid of Morg, but Jack didn't want trouble with him. He wanted to be left alone to work his spread and to persuade Hetty that she ought to marry him.

It was just like Morg to put a burr under his saddle. Larkin left the saloon wondering how the play would be made, his face creased with worry...

He met Hetty coming out of the general store.

"Hair ribbons," she said, holding up her purchase. "For the dance tomorrow night."

Larkin didn't need to ask what color. They'd be blue, to match her eyes, and they'd look like little patches of sky in her desert-sand hair. She had a face like a little pixie, always glowing with expectation of fun and excitement.

It was the only thing about her that worried Larkin. He often brooded about her impishness, wondering if she'd like the job of hard-working wife to a hard-working small rancher.

But he had to grin at her. Then, when he thought of Morg, his face sobered. "I was talking to Morg," he said.

Hetty frowned. "I wish he hadn't come back; he's up to some trouble. I don't see why Dad puts up with him," she said, sighing. "I think Morg hates Dad, really. He seemed awfully glad to find he was back east on business. Morg wrote to him from jail and said he was through making trouble, and Dad's gullible enough to believe him. I guess I should have been a boy, and these things wouldn't happen."

"I'm glad you weren't," Larkin said, with all his heart. He was a little relieved to find, anyway, that Hetty didn't know about the real trouble that was brewing.

But she seemed to be incapable of considering anything serious for more than a minute; soon she was chattering away about the dance. "This Red

Nevers they're bringing in to play—they say he's terribly handsome. You won't be jealous if he asks me for a dance, will you?"

"You bet," Larkin said, and again a little shot of alarm went through his stomach. He began to wish he hadn't promised to take Hetty to that dance—

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After Hetty went home, Larkin bought a few supplies and headed back for his spread, thinking about Morg and Hetty's father. Old Dan was not gullible, he knew; it was just that the milk of kindness hadn't soured in him. He believed in forgiveness, and wanted desperately to prove he could make a man out of Morg. About the only thing he wouldn't take was tampering with Hetty and her happiness.

Larkin knew that and Morg knew it, too; it was painfully apparent that Morg must have something up his sleeve that concerned itself with making Jack no longer a person of interest to Hetty.

And whatever you could say about Morg, you couldn't say he was stupid.

Larkin had got bacon and beans and fresh bread for dinner, but somehow he didn't feel like eating. He got out the scythe, honed it, and rode out to clear the brush away from the water-holes. He sweated and felt better. But as the sun sank so did his stomach. He was not looking forward to that dance.

HE PICKED up Hetty at eight the next evening, and they walked to the church where the dances were held every week. Usually a group of local men banded up to make the music, but this week was Roarin' Tap's fifteenth anniversary, and something special was predicated. So Red Nevers and his traveling barn dance group had been imported.

The church was crowded, but Larkin's keen eyes picked out Morg immediately. He was all slicked up in spangled silk shirt and striped trousers, and he was talking chummily to a handsome stranger.

One look at the stranger's curly red mop dispelled any doubts Larkin might have had; it was Red Nevers. Hetty saw him, too, and her pretty mouth made a small zero. "He *is* handsome," she said.

"Yeah," Larkin agreed, feeling a pang of jealousy shoot through him. His eyes wandered to the brace of Colts strapped around Morg's hips. Guns were taboo in here, but then Morg usually did as he pleased. And he could handle those irons, Larkin knew; in fact, Morg was gifted in all the talents of brutality. A slashing, merciless man with his fists, slick with a knife and bull-whip, and crazy-fast on the trigger.

Larkin could handle himself, but he had to put the guns away after his narrow escape at the robbery; he was no match for Morg, anyway.

Jack's eyes went back to Red Nevers, and saw that he was looking at Hetty with more than a passing interest. His heart looped as Hetty put her hand on his arm. "Dance, Mr. Larkin, or are you going to stand there gaping?"

"Dance," he muttered, as Nevers went on the stand with the rest of his boys and picked up an accordion. In a moment he was tripping around in a square dance, but he saw only Morg, arms folded, leaning against the wall, a look of smug hate on his narrow face.

And then Hetty was back in his arms, laughing. A ball rose up his throat and it nearly choked him. If he lost Hetty...

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Nevers asked for the first dance about an hour later. He turned over his accordion to one of his boys, and bowed very low before asking.

Larkin thought that Hetty accepted a little too eagerly. He left the floor, miserably, and slumped onto a bench. He couldn't bear to watch Hetty whirling in Nevers' arms, and he turned his head and saw Morg angling toward him.

Morg sat down comfortably. "They make a nice couple, don't they, Larkin?"

Jack was too sick to answer, and Morg slowly rolled a smoke. "O'course," Morg continued, "I didn't have anything to do with it. I just explained to Nevers what kind of hombre *you* were—and told him how Hetty likes flashy men. Good-time men, that could really show her around. It'll do Hetty good to dance with someone that don't smell like he got a bull in his hip pocket."

Larkin felt the blood going to his head. He balled up his fist, but Morg's hands went inconspicuously to his belt. No, it wouldn't do to start anything; it would only give Morg the excuse he was looking for.

The dance ended and he got up and went blindly toward Hetty.

Nevers came around about six times before the dance ended, and Larkin noticed that Hetty seemed to enjoy herself less and less in his own company.

WHEN IT was time to leave she seemed positively cool. Larkin tried a few futile remarks on the way home, but Hetty didn't respond. In front of her dark house he took her by the shoulders. "Hetty—"

Hetty interrupted. He had never heard her voice so cold. "Jack Larkin, if what I've heard about you is true, I must say you're the most despicable man I've ever known, and—"

"It's a damned lie, Hetty," he said hotly. "Morg is just—"

"You did fall in love with me at a very convenient time; just as Morg was about to be released," Hetty went on. "You never took any interest in me before."

How could Jack tell her that growing up with her had blinded him to what she was; that he'd not realized till then that she was a lovely woman?

Hetty must have taken his lack of an explanation as a signal of guilt; she broke out of his hands and ran into the house, and Larkin balled up his big hands and stood frozen. He wanted to run in after her, but his pride revolted. It would make it seem all the truer, that he was trying to hide under her skirts. There was no way he could show her he loved her.

He started down the street to get his horse, walking stiffly, wondering what would happen now...

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He didn't leave the ranch for three days, sticking mostly around the house repairing gear, hoping Hetty might ride out, as she often did.

On the fourth day he saddled the sorrel, and, on second thought, went into the house and rummaged in a drawer till he found the old single-action Colt he'd once packed.

A couple of practice draws convinced him of his inadequacy. If it came to a shootout with Morg he wouldn't stand a chance. But the thing heaviest on his mind was Hetty; he had to see her, pride or no pride.

IT WAS high noon when he rode into Roarin' Tap. He went first to her house and pounded on the door, but no one came. He didn't think much about that; she was probably down at the store buying something. He left the sorrel hitched in front of her house and walked down there.

A swarm of flies followed him in the screen door. There was no one inside but Jake Knepp, the proprietor.

"Seen Hetty?" he asked, laying a sweating hand on the counter.

Knepp looked surprised. "Ain't you heerd? It's all over town she run off with that there Red Nevers, the musician, day 'fore yesterday and ain't

been heerd of since—not even by Morg." Knepp paused for breath. "Ain't you heerd?"

Knepp's face dissolved in a red blur. Larkin felt himself turning and his feet were like chunks of cement as he moved toward the door...

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It was a fifteen-minute ride back to the creek that bordered his ranch toward town, and when he got there he felt he could go no farther. He led the horse into the trees and sat down on the bank of the stream, watching it but too stunned to see it.

When he raised his head he saw it was late afternoon. He got up, stiff, and started mechanically on the rest of the ride.

He had gone over a mile before he noticed that there were two clear sets of tracks on this dusty trail that was seldom ridden by anyone but himself. One set headed into town—his own, from morning; the other set pointed toward his ranch.

Morg's face flashed into Larkin's mind, and his eyes flitted over the clumps of chapperal scattered around and ahead of him. Maybe waiting in ambush—

But the tracks continued straight ahead, and he kept his eyes glued on them; when he neared the ranch he dismounted, tied the sorrel, and continued on foot, creeping behind a ridge of scrub oak.

From the edge of it he could see the house and the new stable he'd built. There was no evidence of a horse, but if Morg was waiting, he might have put it in the stable, figuring Larkin would come first to the house.

Larkin hitched the Colt back, got down on his hands and knees, and began to crawl toward the stable, keeping himself concealed from the view of the house. When he reached the stable he slid up and edged the wooden door open.

There was a horse inside, still saddled, in one of the stalls. Larkin slipped inside and stared at it.

It had evidently been hard-ridden, the saddle was a cheap one. It did not look like a horse Morg could or would have been riding. And the horse was breathing easily, as if it had been there for several hours.

And then he thought of Hetty She had come back! She was waiting for him in the house.

He was positive of it; it was like her to put the horse here, instead of letting it stand in the hot sun; it was like her not to be able to unsaddle it.

His head whirled. He wanted to run in, but he was too excited. He must be calm, must know what to say. There could be no misunderstanding: he mustn't appear too anxious.

LARKIN ripped the saddle off the horse, thinking savagely. He put some oats in the trough, grabbed a pitchfork out of the haypile on the floor and threw a few forkfuls in the stall. He had dropped the pitchfork and was trying to straighten his sweaty shirt collar when he heard the voice.

"That straw'll be something soft to fall on, Larkin."

He whirled as Morg came in the door, both Colts trained on him. There was a wide grin on his face. "You were so busy lookin' for me in front of you that you didn't see me followin'," Morg said. "I was ridin' out when I spotted you comin' out of the creek, so I just tailed along."

Larkin kept his hands in front of him; Morg closed the stable door. He looked around, and, if he noticed the horse at all, he apparently assumed it was one of Larkin's.

"Yep, she run off with Nevers," Morg said. "Which means you're no longer of interest to her. Which also means I'm going to give you what you got comin'."

"You won't get away with a killin'," Larkin said.

Morg sneered. "Why not? You're packin' a gun. I was hopin' you'd put one on. After I kill you, I'll put it in your hand; nobody'll be able to prove you didn't draw first. I might get fined ten bucks for disturbin' the peace."

Larkin knew Morg was right; killing a man in a fair gunfight was thought of very lightly, and there'd be no way to show it hadn't been fair.

His stomach was churning; he thought of Hetty, and thought of saying, *"She's back, you can't kill me now."*

But Jack knew he couldn't say it, because that would be hiding behind her skirts; there would no longer be any doubt about it.

His eyes dropped to the pile of straw he was standing behind. The pitchfork lay at his feet, tines up and resting on the straw. It was pointed straight at Morg, and the end of the handle was only a few inches from his own toe.

He looked up, and Morg was breathing fast. "Like they always say," Morg said, " 'I waited a long time for this—' "

Larkin inched his concealed foot back, then, as Morg's fingers tightened on the trigger, he kicked savagely at the butt of the pitchfork.

The fork took a foot or so of straw like a sled, then it sailed off at Morg like an Injun spear. Morg saw it and sprawled on the floor; it landed on him harmlessly.

LARKIN went right after it, leaping over the straw and diving head first as Morg's wild shots smashed through the roof. His flailing fists caught Morg in the face, and then he grabbed the Colt from his holster, brought it down with a force that made a stunned thudding noise.

Morg stopped kicking.

Larkin got up, slowly, as Hetty came running to the door. She stared wild-eyed from Morg to him, and he forgot the little speech he'd devised for their meeting.

All he could say was, "You're back."

Hetty almost leaped into his arms, and suddenly was sobbing like a very small girl. "I—I had to come back; you didn't come after me! I thought if you really loved me you'd come after me, and I'd know; but you didn't—and then I thought about it and knew you didn't come after me because you *did* love me and I'd hurt you. It wasn't Morg, at all, because then you'd have done anything to get me back..."

Remembering him, she looked down. "Is—is he dead?"

"No," Larkin said, "but he won't bother anyone any more. As soon as he comes around I'm going to see he gets out of town—and doesn't come back. That, my dear," he said sternly, "is to make sure there's never any doubt about my intentions."

Hetty sighed. "I don't mind. And I don't think Dad will, after this. Like they say when daughters get married: 'He isn't losing one, he's gaining a son'."

Larkin said, "It's hard work on a ranch."

"I don't care. I've had my fling, and I'll like this better."

"Just the same, I'm not takin' any chances," Larkin said. I'm goin' to take accordion lessons!"

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A Powerful Diamond Novel

THE WAY TO WIN

by Wadsworth Nealey

is in the March

SUPER SPORTS

GOLD TRIMMED

by Rex Whitechurch

Doc Gates came out second-best in the game with Faro Jack, and he had to withdraw as a contender for this pretty milliner's hand. But Doc had a trick or two up his sleeve...

THE ADVENT of th' milliner's coming to Red Cloud ain't never been forgot to this day. Although she was high an' mighty here in th' summer of th' Rush, an' grantin' there ain't nobody alive who was men and wimmin then, th' Red Cloud noospaper makes up for th' lack o' th' livin' records. Old Tyrus Cobb of th' *Chronicle* ain't goin' to let nobody forget nothin'. When it narrows down to havin' th' spirit of th' old home town in a fellow's blood, I reckon Old Tyrus has it in his'n.

Every once in a while, when th' other towns around Red Cloud are throwin' their rodeo fits, an' th' Gold Rush is celebrated, an' th' young men are lettin' their whiskers grow, Old Tyrus will come out with one of them there hair-rasin' tales of his'n. Usually he paints fine word-pictures of Red Cloud when she was in her prime.

"There has been more happen here in Red Cloud, Rucker," he says to me, "than she ever needed to distinguish herself. We don't need none of them hundred anniversary celebrations to put our town on th' map. No, sir, Bob. Jist leave it to th' *Chronicle*."

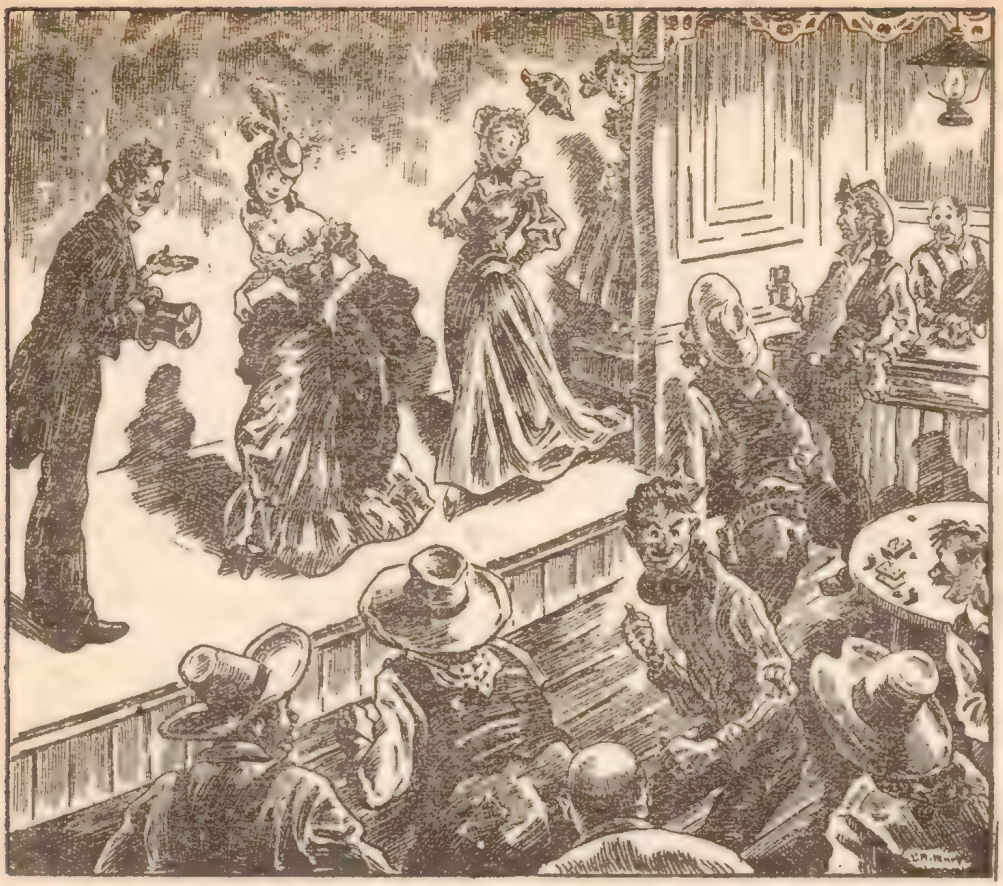
I guess th' milliner with th' cinnamon-colored hair jist about wrecked this here placer camp. Here in th' wonderland district there was a lot of excitement for sure. Doctor Bill Gates had come a-pryin' an' a-pokin' over a pinon clad mesa here in th' Toquimas, an' he had probed into th' desert of Big Smoky Valley, runnin' off th' wild horses an' findin' his way back to Prince of Wales Gulch—or Wonderland as she is called now—an' there Bill strikes th' biggest vein ever hit around Red Cloud. Bill's an Englishman; he loiters around th' Gulch, probin' an' pokin, an' everything is jist as quiet as a funeral in a church-house when Bill, he starts pickin' up them nuggets. There ain't never been nothin' like it before nor since.

This here old town is filled with a lot o' memories for me, an' don't reckon there's nothin' lonelier than where a fellow has lived an' loved an' seen his friends die and get buried. I ain't aimin' to create th' impression I was there in th' Milliner's time, but I been here nigh on to sixty-five years.

But, as aforesaid, it's Bill Gates who starts all th' excitement. Lots of men pulled out of here about as rich as they came in, but some of them got to be millionaires. Bill's one of them, an' Faro Jack Lincoln is another. They wash a great deal o' pay dirt, an' it don't seem neither one of th' other is ever goin' to hit bedrock.

Who is Faro Jack? We-ll, friend, he's a professional gambler—a man close up to th' thirty mark, I reckon—inclined to be stout an' lazy; but he's gone broke out in Denver, Colorady, and he has come to th' Toquimas figgerin' he'll find gold enough to put him back on his feet. He had already hit one fortune in Californy, but th' kerds turned deceptive to him—kind of like a woman does. He's got hair th' color of straw, an' his eyes are so pale-gray they seem to be all white, without no pupils.

Bill Gates is a former doctor of medicine back in Boston; he's close



With Doc Gates managing, the fashion-show is a howlin' success, such as the town never saw before.

to th' forty mark. Must've been somethin' happened to him to turn him ag'in pills and physic; don't know. Jist know he quit practicin' an' come to th' Toquimas about th' same time Faro's hittin' th' Gulch. An' although they don't know it, they're less'n a mile apart an' workin' toward each other.

It's sure a funny thing them two men don't know they are so close together in th' Gulch; however, they find out they're about th' two luckiest sourdoughs that has ever stuck a hand into a h'ist bucket in all this here gold-mad community. Yes, sir.

FARO DECIDES he's got enough of minin' an' walks into Red Cloud one day an' decides to buy out Frank Lan's *Golden Giant* saloon an' dance hall. He pays Frank a quarter of a million on th' barrelhead, but o' course he gets all th' gals.

Frank's been right choosey; they've purty faces an' purtier bodies, but Faro don't like their clothes. He scratches his head an' looks at Buro Jackson, his case dealer. "Buro," he sez, "ain't there a woman across th' street that sells clothes?"

"You mean wimmins'?" Buro lifts his green eyeshade. "Yes, a female that will sell you anything you want to buy."

Faro stomps across th' thoroughfare in th' yeller dust. The minute

he sees Sally, he turns red as a cotton undershirt—miner's variety. He bows gallantlike, an' his big ears are red, too. When he was born, his ears wuz so big his folks didn't know whether he was goin' to walk or fly. At any minute you kind of expect Faro's ears to start flappin', an' him to take off. Otherwise he's a right good-lookin' fellow.

Sally ain't adverse to takin' advantage of opportunities; she's got a keen hearin' becuz she has been listenin' for th' knock on th' door. She knows opportunity don't knock but once.

Faro grips his plug hat in his hand. Th' collar of his b'iled shirt has begun to choke him. He's still hot an' flabbergasted, yet he manages to say, "I'd like to look at some of your Noo York finery for ladies which I have been hearin' about."

We-ll, you know what happens? Sally tries on about twenty of them long-tailed evenin' gowns, like the wimmim wear in high society. Each time she glides out from behind a screen, behind which she has changed from one purty gown to another, Faro swears he ain't never seen nothin' so lovely; he surely must be dead, an' in heaven an' th' angels are walkin' out of th' Golden Gates in review before him. He winds up buyin' ten-thousand dollars worth of them gowns with long trains on 'em, an' payin' Sally ten thousand more to come across th' street an' put on a fashion show. Some of his twenty sugar plums, he maintains, have got to be coached into how to keep them long dress-tails from draggin' in th' sawdust of th' barroom floor.

In th' coal oil lamp's splendor, Sally presents her style parade. She makes them gals climb up th' steps to th' gallery an' come down 'em ag'in. Then she hustles up from amongst th' *Golden Giant's* patrons a male partner for each one of th' gaily attired belles. You c'n hear th' rustle of silks and satins. Faro sez they have got to learn to hold a fellow's arm, an', with th' other hand, hold their long tails up outen th' sawdust.

It's goin' on in full blast when Doctor Bill Gates walks in. The good doctor's eyes get kind of starry, an' his mouth drops down ag'inst his Adam's Apple; he looks as if he has stepped smack dab into a dream—th' one he departed from when he left Boston an' give up his medical practice, for some reason that jist ain't visible to the naked eye.

Doc Gates ain't puttin' both feet forward at th' same time, even though he's in a spell. I reckon he figgers he's still in th' land o' civilization, but them wimmin in their Noo York finery are about th' only pieces of evidence he can dig up. When he glances round at th' bearded, sweat-smellin' prospectors an' their whiskers, he has to look right quick ag'in at th' wimmim to convince himself; he's torn between th' desire to remove his hat an' th' urgency he feels to get good an' drunk. He compromises on th' first an' foremost of them two ideas.

It's while Doc's standin' at th' bar that Sally notices him. It ain't hard to tell that he's different from th' other customers of th' *Golden Giant*. Glidin' towards him with sensuous movements, she says, "Would you mind, please, helping me out? If you'll just walk up that staircase with me and back down again, I'll certainly be appreciative, Mister—?"

"My name," Doc says, "is Bill Gates. Of course I'll be charmed. Miss—er—Miss?"

"My name," she says, smiling with all the witchery of a good-lookin' willowy creature like her can assume on a minute's notice, "is Sally Kinkaid. I'm putting on this fashion display. You strike me as being a person who has been accustomed to women in the finer walks of life."

Doc bows, an' ain't nobody in th' saloon ever seen such gallantry. He takes th' lady's arm and they go through them excercises like they wuz born for that very thing. To tell the

truth, they ain't foolin' nobody, becuz they wuz.

It's right then an' there that Doc Gates becomes th' pride and joy of every gal in th' room. Them wimmin simply go berserk over him, him bein' not hard to look at, an' knowin' how to put on th' fancy airs which is th' heritage of all such gentlemen. Doc has spent a few years absorbin' book-larnin' at a college in Boston; I've done forgot the name of it.

You know how men who lack what other men have got often become jealous an' contemptibly envious. If Doc Gates had won th' battle of th' Alamo, he would not have been honored any more than he was for bein' able to cut up them refined capers.

One of th' biggest enemies he ever made in his life is made that night, without him doin' anything to th' other fellow to incite such a feelin'. Faro turns th' color of a painted woman's cheeks, an' literally foams at th' mouth; them eyes that are white get whiter. He calls a halt to th' whole proceedings an' coldly announces that th' performance is over. If anyone wants to dance with th' wimmin in th' *Golden Giant*, th' price is ten dollars per set.

There's a rush, o' course. Doc ignores Faro's mean attitude an' dances with Sally twice; later on he takes her across th' street to th' hotel.

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FARO SPENDS several days tryin' to find out more about Bill Gates. He then makes th' amazin' discovery that Doc has done exactly what th' town says he's done—he's hit th' richest vein in th' district.

Th' first thing you know, Doc's got a big mine goin' full blast. Jist to stay even with him, Faro recommences workin' his claim in earnest; there they are, less'n a hundred and fifty yards apart, diggin' an' h'istin' bucketfuls o' gold. Purty soon there ain't nothin' left to be done exceptin' to get together on some sort of a compromise.

Doc knows he has been with Sally too many times an' not said anything about what's in his mind; but he's a little timid an' not sure of his ground. All th' time he's been gettin' on Faro's nerves an' Faro is out to nail him. It ain't no go; Doc's watchin' 'em work his mine when Faro rides out in a rubber-tired buggy which he has imported. He walks up to Doc, peers curiously at him a minute. Faro don't say nothin'. Doc don't either.

Finally Faro opens up. "I'm willin' to buy you out. You name your price, I'll name mine. We'll cut th' cards for th' difference."

Doc ain't sorry to hear this offer. He has got all th' money he needs; he figgers he'll go back to practicin' medicine. In Red Cloud they sure need a physician's services. He makes his price low, but Faro thinks he's too high. There's thirty thousand between Doc's price and Faro's offer; of course they've agreed to cut for th' difference.

"You come in to my place tonight," sez Faro. "We'll cut cards. Just like that." He snaps his fingers.

We-ll, Doc rides into Red Cloud, in his rubber-tired buggy which he has imported from Boston. Meanwhile Faro's been tryin' his luck with Sally Kinkaid. "You an' me could get things done," he sez. "I need a wife to help me look after my business. It's growin' out of my hands."

She ain't surprised. You take a woman like her an' there ain't much of anything goin' to surprise her. She sez, speakin' softly, "I'm not sure, Faro. We've been good friends. I'm sellin' a few hats but I'm not gettin' rich. Th' best customers I've got are the wimmin who work for you. I guess mebbe I'd better show my appreciation and say *yes*."

Faro assembles all his friends, an' th' *Golden Giant* is packed that night. Th' mystery is why has Sally been trottin' around with Doc Gates when she's goin' to marry Faro?

There's a little fellow name of Shorty Thompson. He's a fancy gent, his only fault is th' way he drinks his coffee outen a saucer. He wears a plug hat, white gloves an' is dressed up in plaids, with button shoes that have got pearl gray cloth tops. He's about five-five an' has got a pious look. He's come to town a few nights before; bein' he's well stocked with money, an' has a generous disposition, he's buyin' drinks for everyone an' entertain' 'em with his singin'. Shorty's a ballad singer with a lot of sorrow in his voice.

Things begin to hum along toward ten o'clock when Doc Gates comes in to cut kerds with Faro, high man to win. Faro times it jist right; from th' head of th' stairs, posin' on th' gallery with Sally, he claps his hands for attention.

"La-dies an' gentle-men," he drones out, "it does me good to announce here an' now that on next Sunday mornin' at th' hotel, in the grand parlor on th' first floor, me an' Miss Sally Kinkaid—who needs no introduction to you—are goin' to be j'ined together in th' bonds of holy wedlock. Furthermore, an' thereto, I wish to add this appendix which is onusual becuz of th' circumstances. Miss Kinkaid has asked me to state that th' best man at th' weddin' will be th' highly respected Doctor Bill Gates. Will th' doctor step forward, please, and take a bow?"

WE-LL, THIS was noos to Doc, but there's one thing that has got to be said about him—he takes it without bendin' his knees. Movin' halfway up th' steps, hat doffed, he bows to Sally an' to th' crowd, acknowledges Faro's raised hand greetin'; then, coolly an' composedly, he walks down them steps ag'in.

Then Shorty Thompson, risin' to th' occasion, hops over to th' piano, an', after a hurried consultation with Battleaxe Morgan, th' baldheaded house musician, he begins to sing *Auld Lang Syne*. It's a rip-snortin', hell-bustin' night there at th' palace of sin an' shame, I can tell you.

But it gets even more dramatic when them two rivals for a woman's love an' devotion, meet at th' deal table where they are to draw kerds for thirty thousand dollars. One of th' most interested spectators is Shorty Thompson, who watches th' proceedings an' never takes his sharp gray eyes offen Faro Jack.

A hush steals o'er th' big room. Ain't nobody breathin', hardly, much less speakin'. Faro gives th' brand new deck to Doc. Th' latter turns up th' queen of hearts. He ain't onsteady; his hands are still as if he was jist drawin' for fun.

Faro sighs. He's more nervous. But —amazin'! Well, no, not exactly, but surprisin'. He turns over th' king of hearts; an' it's hearts that has goaded 'em into makin' th' gamble. Jist seems to be their hearts layin' on that deal table, their own hearts a-bleedin' for the woman. O' course Faro wins. That's one place where a man's worth more'n a female, rates higher, in kerd games. But it's about th' only place.

Battleaxe Morgan's high-waisted frame an' narrow square shoulders, moves forward. He's heard to mutter in a low tone, "Onlucky at kerds, lucky in love," or somethin' to that effect.

Doc is still placid. He turns to Faro an' offers his hand. They shake; an' then, Doc Gates ignorin' Sally Kinkaid, steps past her an' bows to a redhead in a yeller dress. She is th' purtiest one of th' percentage wimmin; an' Docs says: "May I have th' next waltz?"

Th' tense moment is a million hours long when Battleaxe starts th' music; Doc an' Betty Ridgeway are swirlin' in perfect rhythm, an' everybody's keenly interested in th' demonstration of terpischore or whatever it is they call it. Nimble exponents of th' art, they finish th' waltz with perfect stateliness and dignity. They ain't been nobody else dancin' but them.

●

On Saturday mornin', Shorty Thompson is sittin' in th' *Blue Goose Cafe,* a few doors no'th of Sally Kinkaid's fashion-emporium, havin' his mornin' coffee. Them that's passin' th' open door don't have to look to ascertain th' natural causes of th' disturbance. A jackass with his feet stuck in gumbo mud would sound something like Shorty's coffee-sippin'. He seems eager an' meets th' saucer about halfway, beginnin' to sip before his lips make contact. But his companion is Doc Bill Gates. Doc has opened his office, th' next door, in a clapboarded little buildin'. He's very happy, wearin' his new frock tailed coat an' spotless b'iled shirt In fact he's so immaculate an' so professional-lookin' he stands out in Red Cloud's main street like a brass band; yet, everythin' about him is in good taste an' strictly what all th' other doctors are wearin' back in Boston.

They discuss th' topics of th' day. Despite Shorty's inability to do his coffee-swiggin' without bein' entirely too ostentatious, he is otherwise a gentleman an' very quiet and meek-like.

Doc an' Shorty leave th' beanery, an' Sally is comin' up th' board walk. Doc nods coldly, an' she nods with th' impervious dignity of an empress; Doc leads Shorty on into his office an' shuts th' door.

Sally has been keepin' away from the saloon. It ain't ladylike an' she don't want to step out of character. In truth, she ain't even displayin' herself none in her shop. Her an' Doc jist don't seem to hit it off any more, an' obviously Doc's hidin' a deep hurt. Battleaxe Morgan allows it's becuz th' fancy lady has given Doc th' mitten.

IT'S ABOUT seven o'clock when Shorty walks into th' *Golden Giant,* an' unobtrusively challenges Faro to a kerd game. Shorty has been doin' a little gamblin' around Red Cloud an' he handles his kerds like a novice. Faro ain't interested; but when he sees a fat roll of paper-money, which it's all Shorty can do to get his fist around, an' has trouble crowdin' outen his pocket, why Faro's whitish eyes take on a luster.

Faro asks him over to th' bar an' buys him a drink. "This one's on th' house," he sez, politelike. "How much money you got in that wad, Mister Thompson?"

"Th' last time I counted it," sez Shorty Thompson, "there was approximately betwixt an' between fifty-nine thousand dollars. O' course you'll have to deduct th' dollar I spent for a shave a little while ago. I'd say, to be right truthful, there is jist exactly forty-eight thousand even—in fifty an' one-hundred dollar bills. I want to keep a thousand, so as to go home to Denver, if I lose my grub-stake."

He then lifts his beer-stein an' he makes as much noise, if not more, of th' suction variety, swiggin' th' beer till there's nothin' on th' bottom of th' glass except foam.

"Why pick on me?" Faro nervously brushes his long slim hand through his dun-colored hair. "I'm figgerin' on turnin' in early becuz of th' weddin' in th' mornin'. A man can't go to his own nuptials an' not be wide-awake to what th' preacher sez."

Shorty jist gives a shrug. "I ain't afraid," he states gingerly. "I don't know a heap about kerds; th' only reason I ask you wuz becuz you look kind of honestlike. With them slick-lookin' case-dealers you keep hired all th' time to do your playin', why I'm kinda shy to bet ag'inst 'em becuz they're always in practice."

Apparently this decides Faro; th' next thing anyone knows they're sittin' in a poker game, an' it's ten thousand dollars a hand. Shorty loses th' first two sprees, an' then he buckles down.

Buro Jackson is a staunch onlooker, but finally Faro shoos him away, becuz Shorty sez havin' a professional

case-dealer starin' at him all th' time makes him nervous. Faro's grinnin' up his sleeve all th' time; th' only thing about Shorty that worries him is th' way Shorty's eyes move quick-like, an' don't miss nothin'. He has a face that don't show what he's thinkin' about.

We-ll, the gamblin' between th' amatoor an' th' expert keeps up all night without nary a change of pace. Th' last hand that's played is for th' saloon, inclusive of all them elaborate dresses th' percentage gals are wrapped up in like a banana stays in th' peelin'. You can bet all you're holdin' at this very minute—whether it be fat or razor-blade lean—that th' roof comes offen th' house, an' they're pokin' holes in th' sky, before it's over an' done with for good an' all.

Jist as th' broad palms of daylight's hands spread themselves over th' winder panes of th' richest honky tonk in town, Shorty Thompson is ahead about forty times as much as he was at ten o'clock th' evenin' before; Faro Jack Lincoln ain't got as much as a shillin' left to pay th' parson for his impendin' weddin'.

Ain't none of them folks in Red Cloud knows nothin' concernin' th' said an' aforementioned Shorty Raymond Thompson bein' one of th' slickest kerd-sharks that ever got run outen th' town of Cripple Creek, Colorady. He's said to be th' one an' th' original Shorty-The-Kid, an' is notorious becuz of his technique of dealin' offen th' bottom of th' deck an, outen th' middle of the deck—an' even offen th' top of the deck—without makin' fuss enough in his performance to be heard by th' keenest ears around him. Certainly ain't no eyes sharp enough to ketch him at it.

■

DOC'S STANDIN' in th' doorway of his office that Sunday mornin', when Shorty-The-Kid comes waddlin' out of th' *Golden Giant* packin' a valise that seems kind of heavylike. He stirs up th' yeller dust between him an' th' hotel, never lookin' at Doc, with his luggage pullin' one of his shoulders down close onto his hip.

It's about time for th' nuptials, but Faro Jack he ain't there to greet th' bride. He's sick; he has locked himself up in his hotel bedroom an' is tryin' to figger out through th' process of deep concentration how he's goin' to raise enough money to pay his lodgin' bill an' get outen Red Cloud for parts unknown at th' minute.

Sally's waitin' at th' altar, so to speak, rigged out in an imported white satin gown from Paris that has cost her a princely sum; she's got a long veil an' white gloves to match, an' a red rose corsage that's been shipped in from th' nearest point of civilization at a cost of two hundred dollars.

She's too conservative a woman to spend all that kind of money in vain, so when, ten minutes later than he's scheduled to appear, Doctor Bill Gates breezes in buoyant and cheerful, Sally fairly plunges at him like one of them explodin' Roman candles. Doc sure is th' best man at th' weddin'—which is what he is supposed to be.

Oh, yes—Faro—he lost his gold mine, too. I reckon Doc figgered he has done purty well for himself; after he has become th' husband of th' most bootiful woman in town, he saunters across th' street to th' saloon an' sets 'em up to th' house.

It's a funny thing, but th' new owner of th' *Golden Giant* gives th' new married couple an astonishin' weddin' present. It's a wad of greenbacks big enough to give a mule curvature of th' spine to pack them around. He hands this to Doc an' sez, "Congratulations, Doctor Gates. Th' sincerest best wishes to you an' yours."

What has made Doc so all-fired mad is th' way Faro Jack Lincoln

used a stacked deck to get th' thirty thousand dollars offen him, an' th' way he made Sally believe if she didn't marry him she wouldn't get no more business from his percentage wimmin.

Doc was slow in his love-makin', though; an' Sally she never knowed Doc was in love with her. She was with him, though. When Gates calls in on Faro, who is sicker than he was in th' first place, why Doc hands him a stack o' greenbacks an' sez, "Faro, you didn't know it, but th' man you played cards with was the best card-player in the world. He simply sat down and beat you at your own game. But he's tender-hearted and he told me to give you this money; it will put you on your feet.

"Now, what I recommend for your illness is some of these potent black pills. They're strongly cathartic. But they'll do you good, even if they do gripe a little bit."

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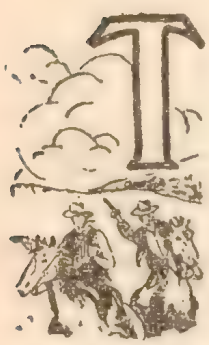
COLD-BLOODED SUICIDE

by The Sundowner



THE MOST cold-blooded incident in the gory history of New Mexico Territory took place at Stinking Springs during the Lincoln County War. It was here that Sheriff Pat Garrett and his posse cornered Billy-The Kid's gang at a line-camp cabin one snowy winter morning.

Charlie Bowdre, not knowing the posse was waiting silently outside, came yawning out of the cabin at sunrise to fetch a bucket of clean snow to melt down for drinking water. Garrett ordered Bowdre to halt and surrender; instead, Bowdre drew his guns and started blazing as he ran for the cabin. Three rapid slugs hit him hard and sent him sprawling at the cabin doorway. Billy-The-Kid dragged Bowdre inside and slammed the door quickly.

The Kid, once a good friend of Garrett's but now a bitter enemy and a wanted outlaw, devised a plan to knock off the notorious Lincoln County Sheriff. "Charlie's done for anyway," The Kid pointed out, "so let's give him his gun and put him out there to rush Garrett and kill him before he kicks off."

The Kid shoved a pistol into the wounded man's quivering hand and shoved him from the cabin. But Bowdre was rapidly dying on his feet; his eyes were glazed and he stumbled like a drunken man through the snow. Garrett and his men were under cover, and they held their fire as Bowdre kept coming toward them.

A few steps further and Charlie Bowdre was done fighting for all time; he crumpled into the snow on his face and died without firing a single shot.

Raging mad at such an inhuman act, Sheriff Garrett and his men plastered the thin-walled cabin with hot lead until Billy-The-Kid and his hired gun hands came crawling out like trapped rats.

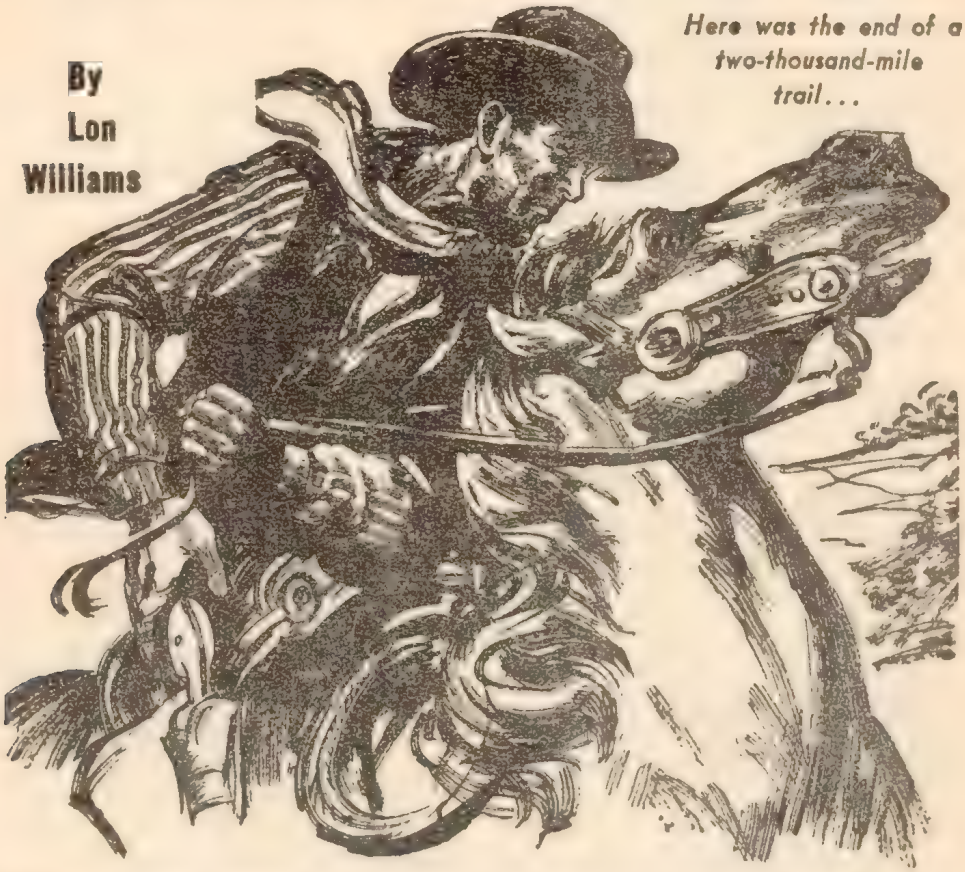
The Kid was taken to Santa Fe, tried, and convicted of murder; but the wily Bill Bonney escaped before it was his turn to swing on the gallows. After he was free, he passed word around that Pat Garrett was "next" on The Kid's killing list.

But it turned out the other way around. Garrett ran The Kid down and killed him at Pete Maxwell's ranch near Fort Sumner on the night of August 13, 1882.

●

Destiny Waits at Panther Gap

By Lon Williams



Here was the end of a two-thousand-mile trail...

He'd come to capture Mose Mallory, come across a continent. But Man-and-a-Half Buckshank had had plenty of time to think on the trail, and his thoughts were leading him into temptation. Why arrest such an expert counterfeiter—why not join up with him?

MAN- AND-A-HALF Buckshank, one year, two thousand miles, and a mangy crop of whiskers out of Pittsburgh by two-horse wagon, sleeved his sun-dimmed eyes and peered distantly at what possibly called itself a town. Although he had no expectation of imminent fatality, a premonition had lately depressed him, and for several dusty miles he had been inquiring philosophically whether a man could escape his fate even if, forewarned, he tried to escape it.

But there was a town ahead. Its appearance dispelled all loneliness and all melancholy thoughts. He'd smelled a stink long before he saw anything

like a habitation—a stench of garbage, grog, sweating horses, and bathless men. It drifted eastward from a gap among mountain crags and gulches, itself a warning of danger and pestilence to any sensitive and timorous wayfarer. Yet to him it carried no message except a hint of filth and rottenness, and possibly of sin.

A couple of bearded horsemen passed Man-and-a-Half, eyed him suspiciously, but shook their heads at each other and cantered off without speaking. That, too, would have been a danger signal of a man of fears and apprehensions, though it disturbed Buckshank not at all. Minutes later four other grim-visaged riders overtook him and passed without speaking, an unneighborly circumstance from which Buckshank merely surmised that everybody thereabouts was mad at everybody else.

He hove to in high spirits, about mid-afternoon, in front of a blacksmith shop, where a stumpy, wild-looking geezer was hammering sparks from a red-hot horseshoe iron. "Ah," he mused. "At last I've caught up. It's none other than Mose Mallory hisself. Too bad I find him makin' an honest livin'."

Mose Mallory, listening to uptown noises peculiarly disturbing character, nevertheless hammering out a tune as he worked, heard a wagon-rumble approach and from a recently acquired habit wondered whether it meant trouble or business. He glanced out a moment later and saw a team of trail-thinned horses stop and hang their tired heads so low their collars slipped down to their ears.

Their driver, a lean, grimy, fuzzy-faced coyote, snaked a skinny hand across his mouth, leaned over, spat, and peered in at Mose. "Howdy there, old whiskers." He stared a while, then shook loose-jointedly with a taunting chuckle.

Mose's hammer hand stilled, and he experienced that fear which all strangers tended to inspire in him. But with a difference now. There was a patent and sinister aspect to this chuckle-bug, centered in that knowing, grinning mouth and those boring red eyes. Doom seemed to hover round him like a bad odor.

"What do you want?" said Mose, chagrinned that a man of his talents should stand in fear of so uncouth and obviously inferior a person.

"Me?" said Buckshank, leering. "Now, I reckon I could want a heap of things, couldn't I? But first off, is this stinkhole of a gold-diggin' town rightly called Panther Gap?"

"Rightly or wrongly, it's called Panther Gap," replied Mallory, already hating this over-confident ogre. Proud from a sense of superiority in talent and culture, he returned disdainfully to his tasks.

Buckshank looked on with amusement, his body shaking loosely. It was a pleasure to dig at these self-exalted dim-wits who regarded themselves as geniuses. Mose Mallory was only one of many frauds and cheats who'd fallen before his persistence. Buckshank said mockingly, "Now, sir, I reckon you could no doubt shoe a horse—after a fashion?"

As expected, Mallory tensed with anger. "Fetch your runaway from a boneyard inside," he said contemptuously.

Man-and-a-Half feigned sudden anger. "Now see here, old whiskers, you're way off trail when you belittle property of Manny Buckshank." He came down, slowly unhitched, and led in one of his bags of bones. "It's that left fore foot, old whiskers. Now go to work, and don't set your nails too deep; I don't want a limpin' horse on my hands."

"Buckshank," said Mose, deeply insulted, "I know how to shoe a horse,

and my name ain't old whiskers; it's Mose Mallory. And worms like you would do well to add a Mister to it." He threw Buckshank a scornful look, gathered his tools, and fell to his trade.

SOMEWHERE outside, whoops and yells mixed themselves with dust and stinks, evidence that Panther Gap was celebrating something or other. Buckshank listened with amused interest, then said to Mose, "Looks like you've come to the proper place to ply your trade, Mallory. Your secret trade I mean."

"Blacksmithing is my trade," snapped Mose, "and it's an honorable trade, entirely open and aboveboard."

"Sure," said Buckshank. He jumped slightly as a pistol shot popped not too far off. "But careful there, Mister Mallory. You don't want to crowd a frog like that; you'll have my horse a-limpin'."

Mose let go everything, straightened indignantly, and drew back his broad shoulders. "Buckshank, I consider myself an artist in whatever I do. Perhaps you should take your hairy skeleton elsewhere."

Man-and-a-Half found it amusing to change his manner of pretending humility. He said, as angry shouts resounded not more than half a block away, "My mistake, Mister Mallory. Of course you're an artist; go right ahead, frog or no frog."

"All right then," said Mose, grudgingly resuming operations, but stealthily selecting a wider shoe.

Manny Buckshank strolled about and cast his eyes into one nook and another, curious as to where Mallory had hidden his tools of artistry.

Mose watched between hammer whacks, calculating his chances for effectively concealing a dead body.

But Man-and-a-Half was suspicious, too, and careful not to turn his back. This was a triumphant moment, and he wanted to live and enjoy it. Tracking a swindler over halfway across a continent was no mean achievement; he figured he was entitled to have a little fun out of his victim before devouring him. Accordingly, when Mallory had finished his hammering and rasping and straightened out of his blacksmith stoop, Buckshank flipped him a lop-sided dollar.

Just as Buckie had anticipated, it made Mallory perspiring mad. "You scoundrel!" Mose stormed, outraged by such cheap perversion of a fine art. "You lowdown deadbeat! Where'd you get this shoddy thing?"

"Look here now, old whiskers, what're you tryin' to say about my money?"

"It's counterfeit—made of lead," declared Mose, shaking with wrath. "It's as sorry a piece of workmanship as I ever saw." He flung it against Buckshank's thin belly. "If I couldn't make a better-lookin' dollar than that, I'd quit."

Buckshank looped over and picked up his spurious coin. "I was only devilin' you, Mister Mallory." He grinned and reached into his pocket. "Here's a quarter of a dollar, as good as ever came off a mint. Take that for your pay, and be danged."

Mallory caught it as it spun toward his chin. Outside, five men rode by unobserved by Buckshank. Mose noted that they had a sixth man in custody, but he thought nothing of it, his mind being on Buckshank's coin, which glistened like freshly minted silver. "Not bad," said Mose. "Not bad at all." He laid it across two fingers, applied thumb pressure, and then tossed it back, a misshappen disc of quicksilvered lead. "Try again, Buckshank."

"You know your trade, don't you, Mister Mallory? Well, how about that?" Buckie's offering of another dollar clinked authentically on Mallory's anvil.

"Voice of truth and virtue," said Mose. Without bothering to look at it, he dropped that one into his pocket. From another pocket he lifted a small goldbeater's bag containing quarters,

half-dollars, and wandering beads of quicksilver.

NOISE LIKE a remote gun battle drifted in unobtrusively while Manny Buckshank watched Mallory with a cat-at-a-mouse-hole eagerness. "Ah," he exclaimed, staring at his change. "Jest as I figured, old whiskers. Counterfeit!"

"But good, eh?" said Mallory, chin up haughtily.

A glancing bullet whined over them, but Buckshank had no time for trifles. Here indeed was a work of art. "Nigh perfect," he admitted, and then, putting his unsavory physiognomy close to Mallory's, he added tauntingly, "but do you know something, old whiskers? I'm a United States deppity marshal, and I've got a nasty, dirty, pocket-worn warrant for your arrest."

Mallory stood his ground, proud and unafraid. "I figured as much, Buckshank; but what of it?"

Buckshank drew back in disappointment. "Yeah, what of it? I've asked myself that." A puff of dust rolled in upon them as a rider sped by, going east. Buckshank coughed, was about to continue when other riders sped by in hot pursuit. He coughed again. "As I was sayin', old whiskers, what of it? I was a year catchin' up with you. Now that I've got you I ain't sure I want you. A man can't travel two thousand miles alone without thinkin' a heap, and askin' hisself a passel of questions. And now—" He paused, rose high enough to pull a few kinks out of his long spine. "And now, Mister Mallory, I'm askin' you a question. What've you got to offer in a square trade?"

A quiet had settled momentarily upon Panther Gap. Mallory, feeling he was being slipped up on, glanced out uneasily. As this was not an entirely new feeling, he forgot it. "I can offer plenty," he said with imperious confidence. "Panther Gap's a hefty place. Gold-diggers by hundreds. Gamblers. Thieves. Murderers. And no sheriff! It's a money-maker's paradise."

Hoofbeats rumbled distantly, and Mose suspected that his particular day was not like other days had been. Still, he gave it only a passing thought, for immediate affairs were pending.

"Getting down to nub and bedrock," said Buckie, "what have you got to offer?"

"A fortune," declared Mose.

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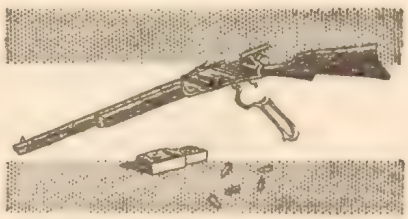

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Hoofbeats rumbled closer, and several hardcases drew up and had a close look at Buckshank's wagon. One bent over and looked in at Buckie and Mose. "Them pugs look all right," he said, his accents hinting that they were lucky pugs. He pulled away without more, and when they'd gone Mose got down on his knees, scraped away some under-furnace cinders and unearthed a box of dies and molds. "Made 'em myself," he announced vaingloriously and laid out three sizes, one each for dollars, half-dollars and quarters.

Buckshank examined them minutely. "Best I ever seen," he declared eagerly.

Mose dug into a secret cavity beneath his anvil block. "Give that a squint," he said exultantly. "It's a mold for double-eagles, all finished and ready for business. Cast your twenty-dollar pieces with silver-copper alloy, wash 'em in gold, and nobody but an assayer could tell 'em from genuine articles. It's a way to get rich."

Buckshank extended a thin hand as a way of pledging his sacred honor. "Mose Mallory, from now on our trails run as one."

"That promise we'll stake our lives on," said Mose, as their hands clasped firmly. He put away his dies and molds then and filled Manny's hand with lead dollars, freshly shined with mercury. "Partner, let's celebrate."

THEY LEFT Buckie's team hitched in a shady spot and strode joyously up into Panther Gap's cesspools of sin and damnation. Here and there they passed knots of silent, watchful men, whose mouth corners drooled streaks of tobacco juice and whose belts sagged with holsters and sixguns. To those uncouth gents, Buckie and Mose gave not even a nod or a polite look. Their light and eager footsteps led them to where there was life, to where liquor and laughter customarily commingled, and men and women were gay.

"Town's sort of quiet," observed Mose.

"We'll liven 'er up," declared Buckie.

In Sleepless Hogan's swill joint, Manny Buckshank ordered first; with a wink at Mose paid off with one of his companion's bogus dollars.

"Next one's on me," said Mose, throat-hot and heart-happy. He had his dollar ready, its quicksilver sheen undimmed. He didn't plank it down with a jingle-jangle, like a man with honest money, but laid it down easy, its dead-body thud silenced to nothingness.

Their next stop was Chuck Joyner's skin-joint, where they paid lost bets with spurious double-eagles and collected winnings in solid coins. Thereafter they had more drinks, and before sundown they were gloriously stewed and staggering hither and yon in each other's arms.

Some swivel-head in Spade Kassett's hellhole took a shot at somebody else, and Buckshank yelled, "Shoot again."

Then a whole fusilade of pistol shots sent glass shattering down, to be followed in due time by a parade of corpses.

"Yippee!" yelled Mose. "Lesh have another drink."

Their wanderings led them to Hardknuckles Ezell's unaccountably-deserted rum shop, and there they guzzled until they could barely stand. There, also, Man-and-a-Half Buckshank made his great disastrous blunder. He planked down a bogus dollar with a reckless flourish, and it didn't jingle. Instead, it fell with leaden sadness, and so hard that tiny globules of quicksilver were jarred from its lustrous sides.

"Lesh go home," said Buckie then. "Where ish your home, ol' whiskers?"

But they'd progressed no more than a dozen yards when they began to see ugly, unhappy faces all around them. Hardknuckle Ezell was among them, showing everybody his shining new dollar.

Then a big man with black whiskers clamped hands on their shoulders. "You gents can't go home—not yet."

"Sure, we can go home," said Mose.

"Gesh your hands off."

"You're both wanted down in Single-throw Tipton's back lot," Black Whiskers advised them quietly, but firmly. "There's to be some hangin's, which you fellers want to be at. Fact is, they're hangin's you can't miss."

They struggled drunkenly to get loose, but found themselves hustled roughly along and flung bodily into a grim circle of square-jawed men whose minds hadn't been fogged with redeye, but whose rough faces looked tired and bored.

"What's this mean, Mose Mallory?" Buckie demanded, beginning to sober a little.

"I reckon it means our goose is cooked," said Mose, nodding toward a stretch of flat ground and a group of pines, where seven or eight rope-hung bodies swayed easily in a passing breeze.

Buckshank's thoughts cleared fast then, and he remembered something important out of his past. He remembered that he'd been a deputy marshal, that he still possessed a precious badge.

"No," he said to Mose in a mighty upsurge of hope. "Not my goose; just yours." He put his narrow shoulders back and shouted importantly, "Gentlemen, iss a lucky thing I'm 'bout to shave you from a turrible mishtake. I'm a United States deppity marshal. I've come two thousand miles to track down thish counterfeitin' varmint, Mosh Mallory. A hangin's what he deserves, an' I'm willin' to turn 'im over an' let justice be done. Ash for me, I consider I've done my duty, nothin' more nor less."

Murmurs arose, and seconds passed before he could be further heard. Then he held up his badge. "There you are, men—badge of a genuine deppity marshal."

"You filthy, double-crossin' turncoat!" raved Mallory. "I hope they make you out a liar."

A DRAWLING, coarse voice drifted across to them from a bearded group of miners, most of whom

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slumped wearily along benches of split logs. "Long Bill," that unsympathetic voice inquired, "you're a lawyer; ain't it a crime to impersonate a Gov'ment officer?"

A tall, mummy-like gent pulled at a goatee and replied indifferently, "That's right, Judge Schulman."

"So," commented a glum-faced character behind a makeshift bar of justice, "he's not only a counterfeiter; he's also an impersonator."

"But looky here," shouted Man-and-a-Half. "I've get a warrant against this scalawag." He waved a ragged paper frantically. "It's a genuine article tob."

"So," said Judge Schulman, "you're a forger, too, eh? Long Bill, is forging Gov'ment papers a crime?"

Long Bill came alive sufficiently to say dully, "Sure is, Judge Schulman."

"All right," announced Schulman. "Any witnesses?"

"Here," somebody shouted.

Barkeeps, store clerks, a dance hall manager, a tawdry woman named Frowsy Lou, and Hardknuckle Ezell tramped forward and dropped spurious coins onto an inverted barrel before judge and jurors. They told where they got them, and looked accusingly at Manny Buckshank and Mose Mallory. They were followed by men who flung down Mallory's precious dies and molds, along with some crude articles that had not belonged to him.

"Mine," moaned Buckshank. "Thought I had 'em better hid than that."

Judge Schulman said, "You humbugs anything to say?"

Buckshank said, "Yes, your Honor. I'm a United States deppity marshal, an' I demand to be released. This rascal is my pris'ner, an' you're welcome to him, but layin' a hand on me will bring trouble pilin' down on your heads."

"Gentlemen," said Schulman, addressing a group of grizzlies whom Buckie took to be jurors, "what's your verdict?"

"Hang 'em," said one. Two or three others nodded.

"So say you all?"

A juror nodded and spat. "I'd say run 'em off, if it was any other day; but bein's it's clean-up day in Painter Gap, we might's well make a clean sweep."

Other jurors were engaged in conversations among themselves. A good many spectators were beginning to wander off.

Judge Schulman nodded at Black Whiskers. "Hang 'em, Birchwood."

Obediently, if not downright eagerly, a bunch of hard-muscled Vigies crowded them down to where convenient pine limbs extended welcoming arms.

It was then each doomed man was confronted with earth's final test of courage and greatness.

"You snivelin' polecat," Mose said to his faint-hearted companion. "I've got but one hope left, and that's to see you hanged first."

"Fair enough," said a Vigie, who'd overheard. "We'll fix it that way; he tried to do you dirt anyhow."

To Man-and-a-Half, matters of sequence were now unimportant. Faced by destiny so soon, he had little time in which to achieve that moment of greatness he felt every man to be entitled to somewhere along life's drab and tedious journey. But his thoughts were sublime, and his heart free of vindictiveness.

"Mose Mallory," he said mournfully, "at this moment I'm thinkin' of all them farmers and white squaws and widder women you swindled clean across this country. I'm wonderin' how they'd take it, if they knowed about this. I'd say let them laugh and whoop, if such be their natures, and otherwise if they're gifted with humanity and understanding. Amen!"

And Mose, seeing a rope unfurling over a limb, said it too.

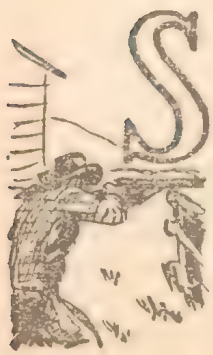
Amen!

Lily was having a wonderful time at the dance. . . .

A Mighty Responsible Man

By Richard Brister

"Nope, I'm a confirmed bachelor; a man that gets married is takin' an unnecessary load on his shoulders." So opined Steve Woodring, a responsible gent by all his lights. So dang responsible, he took the care of this girl on his broad shoulders sheerly out of his sense of duty. But marriage—nope, that was too much—he claimed.



STEVE WOODRING entertained some mighty strong views on the subject of marriage; he was against it. "I'm a confirmed bachelor," he announced whenever he rode into Pine Bluff for supplies and a brief glimpse of the civilization he had turned his broad, muscular back on. "A man that gets married is takin' an unnecessary load onto his shoulders," Steve often said. "Even a jackass has got enough sense to skitter and buck when you go to strap a load on him. But a man, he's made different; let some flirty-eyed female look at him crosswise, and the next thing you know the dang fool's workin' his

hands to the bone, tryin' to support a wife and six children."

"Steve," Old Man Jethro asked him one day in the Pine Bluff Hardware, "what've you got against women? How come you're so dead set on escapin' the Holy Bonds, as they call it?"

"If you want the truth of it," Steve said in a moment of rare candor, "it's on account of I'm too dad-blamed responsible-minded."

"Hey?" said old Jethro, and blinked at him.

"You take the most of us fellows that ain't fixing to marry," Steve said; "we're shyin' away on account of we know if we ever do get hitched, we're gonna pitch in and work like Sam Hill to make a go of it."

"Well, it's a theory," Jethro admitted, stroking his beard and grinning at the tall, long-haired homesteader.

"Call it any high-falutin' name you can think of," Steve grinned back, shrugging; "it's the truth." He picked up his purchases from the worn wooden counter and walked purposefully out of the hardware.

●

A month later, Steve's self-proclaimed sense of responsibility was put to a severe test. Steve was working down in the south forty, stump-grubbing, when he heard the distant crack of rifle-fire from somewhere down the lonely, godforsaken valley where he had his homestead.

Steve's place was forty miles from Pine Bluff, twenty-eight miles from his nearest neighbor, and his almost complete isolation made the sound of these shots an event. He leaped up on old Dollar, grabbing his Sharps rifle—which he kept constantly by him—and rode bareback down the wide, uneven floor of the Lodge Pole Creek valley.

Topping a little rise he suddenly pulled up on Dollar, and said, "Whup! Whup, boy. Easy now. Easy." Below him, two hundreds yards by the crow's light, a small wagon of the prairie-schooner design sat by the creek's side. A double yoke of oxen stood panting, as if from a long run. A tall, round-shouldered man with a flowing mane of white hair sat limp on the ground, a long-barreled rifle propped menacingly atop bony knees. He had the look of a man who had been hit, and who was holding himself together in a desperate effort to stave off disaster.

"Hola, there old man," a voice called from behind a cluster of boulders at the opposite side of the valley. "Come out from in back of that wagon, where I can see you."

The old man peered through the spokes of the wagon wheels, trying to seek out the hiding place of his assailant.

SURPRISINGLY, a shot rang out from inside the wagon; even from his vantage point at the opposite side of the valley, Steve Woodring could hear the lead spang off one of the boulders that concealed the man who obviously had attacked the wagon.

The man peered craftily over the top of jagged-topped stone. Steve Woodring suddenly cupped hands to his mouth, shouted, "You. Snake-in-the rocks, over there. You better crawl back in the hole where you came from."

He lifted his Sharps, sent a bullet whistling over the valley. He saw his man wince and flap a hand up toward his face; seconds later he heard the sound of his slug chipping shale off the top of the man's covering boulder. The fellow ducked out of sight and moments later he was tearing along at full tilt on horseback toward the eastern end of the valley.

"Guess he figured there might be more than one of me," Steve said disgustedly. He eased Dollar down the rock-and-shale-strewn side of the bluff and approached the old man on the ground by the wagon. As he did so, a slender, chestnut-haired girl leaped quickly over the tailboard of the wagon and stood staring dubiously at him. She was a pretty girl, even when she was badly frightened and trembling.

"Ma'am," Steve fumbled, "you shouldn't go around jumping out of wagons like that. I'm a mite jumpy; I might've shot you."

The girl looked woodenly at him, then ran to kneel beside the white-haired man. "Daddy," she said, "Daddy, how—"

"I'm hurt, girl," the old man gasped weakly. "Help me over towards that big tree there." He glanced up. "Give a hand, will you, stranger?"

"Sure."

Steve and the girl got the old fellow over to the tree and propped him up so he could breathe with some comfort. The bullet had gone through his chest; he was bleeding at the mouth; and Steve knew it was only a matter of time for the old fellow.

"What happened?" he said to the girl.

Her pretty shoulders rose and fell in a numbed, grief-stricken gesture. "We were beating our way west, toward the gold fields. I think that man spotted us just a few days back, just before we crossed over into this state from Nebraska. He followed us at a distance all day yesterday. Today, he finally got up his nerve and took a potshot at Daddy."

Steve's mouth hardened. He glanced at the weather-worn, pitifully inadequate trail-wagon, the weary drag-headed oxen. "What did he want? Surely not that outfit."

The old man's eyes flicked up warningly and Steve suddenly caught the meaning within them. The girl looked down, blushing scarlet. Steve shuffled his feet in the worn, heavy work boots and said, "Ma'am, you'll excuse me. I ain't in town much. I got a little homestead up aways here, all by my lonesome; sometimes a man clean forgets now mean the world is."

He could feel the old man scrutinizing him all this while, as he talked to the girl. "Young feller, I wanta talk to you. Private... Lil, you leave us a bit, will you now? Like a good girl."

She didn't understand, from her puzzled expression, but she nodded numbly at her stricken father, and walked away.

"WHAT NAME d' you go by, young feller?"

"Steve Woodring."

"Good. I'm Harry Thatcher. That there's my only daughter, my Lily. Now, young feller, I'm goin' to die, and that pretty sudden, so I mean to speak plain. You've an honest look and I like what I seen of you."

"Mr. Thatcher—" Steve said uncomfortably.

"Dammit, man, don't call me 'mister'; I'm dyin'. God love a man that dies in front of a stranger that don't have no more sense than to call him mister."

"Harry—"

"That's some better. Now, Steve, I got me a bad problem. Dyin' ain't such a mean prospect. Every man comes to it, sooner or later. But I can't hardly face up to it, checkin' out with that poor girl on my conscience. What's to become of her? What's to become of my poor little Lily?"

"Well, I—I don't rightly know," Steve fumbled unhappily. "You mean, she—you mean, there's nobody—"

"Nobody," the dying man brooded. "Me and her, and her and me, that's the whole family."

"But—"

"You see the way of it?" the old man groaned. "You see how I'm fixed, do you? You're my only hope, son. I can't go over the hill feelin' anyways proper and decent, as that girl's daddy, without havin' some assurance she'll be looked after. You a married man, are you?"

"No," Steve said, wincing a little at the very suggestion.

"It's a pity. If you was married, I'd of asked you to take her home to your wife, and the both of you look out for her till she's properly settled. I tell you, Steve, it's mean; it's too hard on a man, dyin' with his work unfinished like I am. You got to help me."

"How?" Steve said weirdly.

"Promise me you'll stand by the girl, just like I would of, if I hadn't stopped that damn' bushwhacker's bullet. You got to take over my job for awhile, son, till—"

"Now, wait," Steve said dubiously, "how do you figure I have to? I'm just a fella that happened to—"

"Steve, it's your duty, your bounden duty. You look to me like a man with a strong sense of duty."

"That I am. But—"

"Y' see, son, if you hadn't of turned up when you did, she'd of got herself killed. Bound to, sooner than let that skulkin' coyote lay a filthy hand to her. So except for you, she wouldn't be livin', faced with the problem of makin' her way in a new, strange part o' the country... You see how you're responsible for her now, do you?"

"Well, in a way," Steve said. Somewhere, he suspected, there was a flaw in the dying man's logic, but he hadn't meanness enough in his nature to seek out the flaw now and expose it.

"Son, I knew you was just naturally decent," the old man said weakly, and his ashen face brightened in a smile that was like sunlight after a storm. "Then, you'll promise? You'll look after the girl, till you figure she's able to look out for herself?"

"All right. Yes," Steve said, wondering what sort of trap he had bungled into.

"Son, you've done a good deed this day. You've made it possible for an old man to die easy." His hand came up waveringly, and Steve gripped it. "Steve, send the girl over to me. Time I had a word or two with her."

Steve went over to where the girl stood quietly sobbing and said, "Ma'am, you'd better go to him, I reckon."

LESS THAN three minutes later the old man was gone. The girl sat woodenly for five more minutes, with her dead father's head pillowed on her lap, while Steve awkwardly waited. He went over finally, picked the frail old body in his arms, and deposited it in the wagon. He led the stricken-eyed girl to the wagon, fastened Dollar to the back on a lead line, climbed up on the box seat and flicked the reins at the rumps of the oxen.

"Ma'am," he said, as he swung the team toward the homestead, "I'm real sorry, for your sake."

"Where are we going?" she asked dully.

"My place. I'm lookin' out for you until—"

"You don't have to do that. You can take me to the nearest town. I'll sell the team and some of our belongings, and get lodgings. I'll get a job and—"

"Ma'am, I promised your daddy. I'm a man that holds hard on a promise. I'm holdin' myself responsible for what happens to you. And speaking plain, ma'am, the town of Pine Bluff ain't exactly a place for pretty young girls to be running around loose in."

"I can take care of myself."

"How old are you, ma'am, if you'll excuse me askin'?"

"Seventeen."

"Giddap," he said, flicking the reins over the oxen, and he drove to the homestead.

"It ain't much," he said, indicating the crude log dwelling with its flanking corral and stables. "Keeps out the weather. Some, anyway... Miss Lily, if you'll look around for a spot where you figure he'd like to lie, I'll fetch the shovel out of the shed and commence right in digging."

She decided on a little grassy knoll, not far from the house. Steve fell to work with a will, and the job took him less than two hours. He went in the house and the girl was kneeling there, dry-eyed, beside her dead father.

"Ready up there," he said gently.

She turned and looked miserably at him. "Mr. Woodring, could you—could you possibly—"

"What, ma'am?"

"He was a God-fearing man." Her blue eyes dropped. "He'd like having a preacher."

He stood there looking at her reflecting that the nearest parson was half a county away, but that of course she didn't know what she was asking. At a time like this, she could only try to do what was right for her father.

"All right, ma'am. I may not be back till tomorrow. You won't be frightened, alone here tonight with him?"

She shook her head firmly. Her blue eyes brightened, and the gratitude in her face warmed him against the long ride he faced now.

•

He rode down the main street of Pine Bluff at a quarter till midnight, and had to rouse up Parson Dinwiddie.

"Well, of course, Steve," nodded the parson. "We'll ride out first thing in the morning. But that poor girl now—what's to be done about her?"

Steve told him.

"Why, now, son," the parson laughed uncertainly, "that's quite out of the question. It's all well enough that you gave the father your promise—and a fine Christian charity you displayed in so doing, my son—but you've got to remember, Steve, that you're a young man and she's a young woman."

"That doesn't figure in this," Steve said.

"And pray tell why not?"

Steve blushed. "I guess you haven't heard how I stand toward the women."

The parson looked at him. "Steve, you'll have to have somebody else out there with you, if you mean to keep that young girl in your house. Why, son, you'd ruin the girl while trying to help her!"

STEVE GAVE the matter a good deal of thought while trying to sleep that night in the parson's guest bed, and that strong sense of responsibility shaped his final decision. The next morning, early, he and the parson rode out to the homestead, and Miss Lily's father received the proper burial the girl'd wanted for him.

Steve spoke privately to the young lady. "Ma'am, I'm sendin' you back to Pine Bluff with Parson Dinwiddie. I'll follow tomorrow or the day after, soon as I can manage to tie up the loose ends on the homestead."

"I—I don't quite understand," said Miss Lily.

"Got to see your future settled," Steve said, "and I been givin' some thought to the matter. Way out here in the middle of nowhere, alongside of me, ain't no proper place for you, Miss Lily, and—"

"I—I thought you said Pine Bluff wasn't, either."

"Like I say, I'll be followin' you into town. Gonna get me some kind of job in there, so I can keep a weather eye on you."

"But I won't have you rearrange your whole life just for my sake," Lily protested; "you've done enough for me already."

"Miss Lily, I got my plain duty and I ain't goin' to shirk it."

"But couldn't the parson—"

"It ain't his responsibility; it's mine. I ain't shucking it over onto nobody."

"All right," the girl said uncomfortably, "if you insist, Mr. Wobdring."

"Might's well call me Steve from now on, Miss Lily."

"All r-right, Steve."

•

Steve spent a day and a half closing the homestead, and he got into Pine Bluff about nine o'clock of a Tuesday evening. He straightway contacted the parson, who informed him that the girl was living with the Prentices—a fine Christian family—and had taken work at the Bon-Ton Bakery.

"That's a fine young woman, Steve.

She means to make her own way, and not put folks out any more than she has to."

"The girl's all right," Steve admitted without great enthusiasm, and the parson stared curiously at him.

"Steve, why don't you go back home, where your heart is? The girl's fairly well settled, now, and I'll keep an eye on her. You've done your share. No need to close up the homestead and move into town; you're too conscientious."

"I promised her daddy I'd fill his shoes," Steve said slowly; "I mean to fill 'em."

•

STEVE GOT a job clerking in Old Jethro's hardware, and the old man let him set up a crude cot in the back of the store; so, with only eating expenses to come out of his wages, he was able to bank a good bit each week. That part was all right, but the work was confining; he soon longed for the pleasanter, outdoor chores he had known on his homestead.

He spent a good deal of time over on the Prentices' porch, evenings, doing his best to cheer up Miss Lily in her bereavement. One night he suggested, "Miss Lily, it's been quite some time now since you lost your daddy, and there's a dance coming up Saturday night at the Grange Hall. Out here in this part of the country we respect the dead just as much as anywhere else, but we don't give too much time to our mourning. I figure your daddy, what I seen of him, would approve of your goin' to the dance."

"Yes, he would," she admitted. "Daddy said life was short, and folks were duty-bound to make the most of it... Are you asking me to the dance, Steve?"

"Miss Lily, I sure am," Steve said.

Uncle Ed Schofield and his two boys, Rick and Ed, Jr. scratched away on their fiddles, and Steve, despite his size and all those slabs of heavy muscle, proved himself no slouch on the dance floor. After the first set, he led Miss Lily over to a chair, and noticed that she was smiling for the first time since she'd lost her father. She looked real pretty, Steve noticed, and every young blade in the long hall kept darting hungry looks her way.

Steve excused himself, went over to young Harley Stokes, son of old Henry, the local banker, and said, "Notice you eyein' the girl, Harl."

"Don't mean nothing by it, Steve," Harl said quickly. "I know she's with you, and—"

"Wanta dance with her?"

"Sure; she's the prettiest thing that's turned up in town in a month o' Sundays."

Steve took the young fellow across the floor and introduced him to Lily. Harl danced two sets with the girl, after which Steve produced a new candidate, young Bid Cantwell, whose father owned the local livery stable. It went like that all evening. Harl Stokes claimed the last dance, after which Steve reclaimed the girl and walked her home to the Prentices'.

Lily seemed uncommunicative, and Steve said curiously, "Well, did you enjoy it?"

"Why did you take me to the dance, Steve?"

"Why, I figured it's time you come out of the shell and met some young folks your own age, Miss Lily. Kind of serves notice, you're out of mournin' now, and—"

"I see."

"Ma'am, are you mad about somethin'?"

"No, of course not. It was—it was very sweet of you. Very thoughtful." Her voice was kind of thick as she said it.

"How'd you like Harl, Miss Lily?"

"All right. Why?"

"Harl's a real nice young feller. Goin' to be a big man here in Pine Bluff, Harl is, before he's finished. Wind up runnin' his daddy's bank, sure as shootin'."

"Will he?"

"Miss Lily, what's the matter?"

"And I suppose Bid Cantwell will wind up running the livery stable?"

"That's right, ma'am; he'll likely inherit that from his daddy."

"You must be awfully anxious to get back to that homestead of yours," said Miss Lily.

"Ma'am, you keep talkin' in riddles. I don't—"

"Why don't you just go back out there?" she said. "I'm old enough to look out for myself, Steve. The Prentices' have made me practically one of the family; I'm self-supporting."

"Miss Lily, we been over all that. I said I'd stand in for your daddy, until you was all set for the future, and—"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake," the girl cried, "how old are you, anyway? You talk like an old man past sixty."

"I'm twenty-seven, Miss Lily. I declare, I don't know what's got in you; all I'm tryin' to do is my duty."

"Oh, you and your duty," she said. They had come, by now, to the Prentices' porch steps, and she turned toward him swiftly, her pretty face bathed in the soft glow of moonlight. "When a young man of twenty-seven takes a girl to a dance, he has a duty you didn't think of, and that's to dance the last set with her."

"Miss Lily, I'm real sorry. I forgot—"

"And if he's a normal young man," she went on boldly and somewhat grimly, "he has another duty to perform, at her doorstep, Steve Woodring."

She was offering her lips to him, her meaning uncomfortably plain, and her beauty, her nearness, the soft fragrance that clung about her, was a cruel temptation. Steve very nearly succumbed to the intoxication of the moment, but the instincts of a confirmed bachelor saw him through this crisis. "Miss Lily, I'm tryin' to look after you like I was your daddy; you're makin that job mighty hard for me."

Even by moonlight, he could see the girl's eyes flash wounded pride and resentment. "Oh!" she said hotly. "If you aren't the most impossible—Well. good *night*, Mr. Steve Woodring."

●

AT WORK in the hardware store the next day, Steve noticed that Harl Stokes, Bid Cantwell, and a couple of the other young town fellows he'd introduced to Miss Lily at the dance, developed a sudden craving for bakery products and filed into the Bon-Ton where Miss Lily was working.

" 'Pears like," Old Man Jethro said sagely, "you've started a run on the girl, Steve; that what you intended?"

"That's what," Steve nodded, and could not account for the strange sensation of emptiness that caught at his middle. "She's old enough to get married. Pretty enough so she can just about take her choice, and catch herself a first rate husband."

"Wouldn't surprise me," said Old Man Jethro, "to learn you was kind of set on her your ownself, Steve."

"That ain't here nor there; I ain't a marrying man," Steve said.

"But you do kind of cotton up to her?" the old man asked, grinning.

"I'm responsible for her. I'm only interested in seein' her get a good husband. Minute she does, I'll figure my responsibility's finished. Whoever marries the girl will be taking over that worry, and I'll be goin' back to my homestead."

"All cut and dried, hey?" asked Jethro. "That's all there is to it?"

"That's all," Steve said coolly.

●

That wasn't quite all there was to it. The girl began entertaining suitors on the Prentices' porch, evenings, and when the suitors were young men of

some substance, like Harley Stokes and Bid Cantwell, Steve, in his awkward role of proxy parent to the girl, nodded approval.

But one night as he sat on the porch, up walked Judson Egolf to call on Miss Lily. Jud was kind of a ne'er-do-well around town. Worked off and on, never very long at the same thing though, and he spent a good deal of his time in the saloons, gambling and drinking. He was a good man with the cards; he managed to dress well and put up a good front, off his winnings at poker. He was a slick one with the ladies.

"Evenin', Miss Lily," he grinned. "Howdy, Steve."

"Jud," Steve said, "I want you to understand there's nothing personal in this. I'm gonna have to ask you to turn around and walk back downtown where you came from."

JUD WAS a big, handsome man with a Mark Twain mustache and a lot of vanity in him. He wore a silver-plated Bisley Colt on his hip, and he wasn't a man to be pushed around easy.

"Maybe you'd like to explain that a little, Steve," he suggested.

"Sure," said Steve, who had no gun with him. "I'm kind of lookin' out for Miss Lily. Took over the job where her daddy left off."

"Steve," said Miss Lily, "you just be quiet. I guess if Mr. Egolf wants to pay me a sociable visit, he has a perfect right to."

"Miss Lily, I'm a man that does my duty the way I see it. You hush now."

"I certainly will not hush, Mr. Steve Woodring. I think I'm old enough to know my own mind, and—"

"Miss Lily, I ain't goin' to argue it with you. I'm tryin' to do and say what I'd do if I was really your daddy... Jud, like I say, this ain't personal between us, but I'm askin' you to leave quiet."

"On your say-so? Is that it? Jud blustered.

"On my say-so," Steve nodded, ignoring the girl's gasp of resentment.

"Because why?" Jud wanted to know.

Steve sighed. "Jud, I was hopin' you wouldn't force me to say this. You ain't just the type I care to see callin' on Miss Lily."

"Steve!" the girl gasped.

"Meanin'," Jud Egolf growled, "I ain't good enough for her. Is that the idea?"

"I don't enjoy havin' to say it. That's it, Jud."

Jud Egolf's big body stiffened. His mustaches trembled. "Step down here and say it," he suggested.

"Sure," Steve said easily. "If you'd oblige me by shuckin' that gun off."

Jud unstrapped the gunbelt and flung belt, holster and sixgun onto the lawn. His eyes burned up at Steve's. "Are you a-comin', or ain't you?"

Steve walked nonchalantly down the porch steps. Jud swung a mighty blow at his head, missed by a hair's breadth, and stumbled forward, off balance. Steve grasped him in a mighty bear-hug, kneed his legs out from under him, and flung him down onto the walk like a sack of wheat.

Jud hit so hard on the seat of his pants that his teeth clicked. He got up, his handsome face mottled with rage, and leaped to retrieve the gun he had flung aside at Steve's suggestion.

"Steve!" the girl cried.

Steve caught Jud by the tail of his town coat, as Jud stooped to catch up his weapon, and swung him about in a circle, the cloth loudly protesting this sudden sharp strain upon it. When Steve let go, Jud half-ran, half-stumbled forward two steps, tripped, and sprawled at full length in the gutter.

"Jud," Steve said, "I'll give you your gun back tomorrow, when you've cooled down a little. Get along now."

Jud stormed up the street, toward town. Steve turned to Miss Lily. She was looking at him with indignation and yet with a lurking softness behind

the heat in her eyes which made him very uncomfortable, too.

"You've got a nerve, Mr. Steve Woodring."

"Miss Lily, that fellow's no good. Your daddy wouldn't of approved of him calling on you."

"You're not my daddy."

"I'm actin' for him."

"Did it ever occur to you that I might be very fond of Jud Egolf?"

"No," Steve said. "You're too sensible not to see through a fellow like Jud."

"He's very good-looking. The best-looking man in town, in case you've overlooked that fact, Mr. Steve Woodring. And the best dresser."

"Flashiest, maybe."

"He has plenty of money."

"Gamblin' money. Right now he may have some; tomorrow's a question."

"You might as well save your breath, Steve, because I happen to like him. And if I want to see him, I don't see how you can stop me."

"Miss Lily," Steve said disgustedly, "I never spanked a growed woman, but if I figure that's what your daddy would figure you're needin'—" He walked toward her, and she gasped at him.

"Steve Woodring, if you dare lay a hand on me—"

HE CAUGHT her unflung wrist, got hold of the other, and held her as easily as he might hold a child. Struggling, her body brushed against his, and again the nearness of her was a trying temptation. "Miss Lily," he said, "tell the truth now. You were just joshing, weren't you? About liking Jud Egolf?"

"Oh, why don't you go back to your old homestead and just leave me alone?" she said. She relaxed, her body trembling against him, and then she was crying.

"Miss Lily," Steve said weakly, "don't you take on that way. Don't cry. If your daddy was here, he sure wouldn't want that. All I want is what he'd want, to see you be happy. That's my responsibility toward you. That's why I been trying to make sure you get a good husband, that can provide for you proper, and— Miss Lily, didn't you cotton to none of those fellas? Harl or Bid, or them others?"

"No," she said, sniffling. "No, no, no, no, no."

"But ma'am, why not, in tarnation? They're fine, upstanding young fellas. Can't rightly see why—"

She looked up at him then, and there was a moment in which she struggled to hold back the words, but they came swiftly, passionately past her lips. "Because it's you. I cotton to you, Steve. So there," she went on, flushing scarlet. "Now you know. What're you going to do?"

He stared at her, his mouth slack with surprise, the shock rolling through him in waves, and then, suddenly, it was as though he stood in bright sunlight, the warmth of it sliding through him.

"Why, now," he said, badly flustered, "this mixes me up some. I'm a man that always shied away from the idea of marriage, ma'am. All my life I been dead set against it, and—"

"Do you—cotton to me?" she said, snuggling a little.

"Why, to tell you the truth," Steve said, "yes."

"You're still holding yourself responsible for my happiness, aren't you, Steve?" she said, smiling gently. "Do you think you'd make a good husband?"

"Well—" Steve gulped, "—yes."

She was still smiling covertly at him, and he saw that his duty by her was plain. He sighed just once, softly, and then he, too, was smiling, and he pulled her closer against him. Her lips came up eagerly to meet his, and he reflected that sometimes a man's duties could be mighty pleasant.

THE END

Round up on the Range

Fact Feature

by James A. Hines

THE WORD "roundup" is a common, everyday word heard on the Western cattle ranges; but it did not originate there, as many people think. Back in the mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia, the term "roundup" was used before there were any people on the Western ranges except the red man.

In the mountains of Kentucky, Tennesse and North Carolina, people let their cattle run wild and held roundups, to gather them annually. They performed the function in a crude manner, compared to the Westerner's way, years later. The Western cattleman perfected this system and brought it to the attention of the public as an important and colorful phase in the cattle industry.

Roundups are one of the most important functions on the ranges, and two are held each year. There is the spring roundup for the branding of the calf crop; and the fall roundup for gathering beeves for shipment to eastern markets, and branding late calves, as well as those overlooked during the spring roundup.

The early methods of the cowboys on the range were very crude. They would pack up their stuff—that is whatever they needed—and go out for weeks on a "cow hunt" or "cow drive" as it was then called. This was in the early sixties, when the cow business was new. At that time, almost all of the people on the ranges were Southerners who had faced ruin in the Civil War, had turned toward the West and established homes there. They found cattle in many thousands on the ranges. These were the property of anyone who could catch and put their brand, or mark, on them and the main thing find a market for them.

In order to find a market, the cattle had to be driven hundreds of miles to railroads at Lincoln, Nebraska—and later such big cow towns as Abilene and Dodge City, Kansas and Ogallala, Nebraska.

There was dangerous Indian country to go through, treacherous rivers and streams to cross, and bad electric storms, when lightning flashed and danced on the horns and backs of the frightened cattle in balls of fire. Many and many a cowpuncher was killed in these storms. There were deadly stampedes, when the cattle got frightened and ran wild.

WHEN THE stockmen found that they could sell their cattle at these shipping points, they braved the

dangers and put them there. It has been said by old-time cattlemen that 600,000 head of cattle came up the trail to eastern Kansas and southeastern Kansas during the year 1871.

The clothes and saddles and everything else the cowboys had in the early sixties were homemade; there were no flashy and fancy silk shirts, striped pants and white felt hats, such as the cowboys of today wear.

The cowboy would roll up in his blanket—which was sometimes an old Army overcoat that he had brought back from the War—put his saddle under his head and sleep that way. Sometimes he used buffalo robes as cover at night. But when a buffalo robe got wet, it took it so long to get dry again that these robes were not popular with the cowboys.

In the seventies, the trail outfits were still plenty tough and rough. That was about the time when settlers emigrated from the mountains of Kentucky, Virginia, Carolinas, and Tennessee. They brought the word "roundup" with them, and it caught on and spread over ranges like the wild, longhorn steer had.

About this time the cattle business was becoming more and more organized, and cooperation was desired. Stockmen found it necessary to take action, together, in the days of the open range, when there were no fences, and there were thousands of miles to cover during roundups. Each cattleman furnished a sufficient number of horses for his riders, and the larger outfits supplied a mess wagon which later became known as a "chuck wagon." Each district was worked by ranges, in a regular rotation, until each one was thoroughly cleaned up. At the end of the drives the owner knew, by the carefully-kept tally, the increase of his herd and the older number of cattle he owned.

Most outfits, especially the big ones, would send out a "rep." A "rep" is a short word for representative. The rep's job was to ride to the neighboring roundups to gather up stray cattle belonging to his boss. He would then brand the young calves. Also, there were many mavericks—calves that had been weaned away from their mothers and did not have any brand on them—which belonged to any person who could catch and put his brand on them.

The rep was considered a notch higher than the ordinary cowboy; he always had a big string of horses to ride. He had to have a pretty clear memory to remember all the different marks and brands; all of these he had to keep in his head.

Each cow-outfit would always look forward to the roundups. There they would meet old friends and have a reunion in general. As one old-time cowpuncher remarked, "Jest have a big time." And that was what it was, mixed with a lot of hard work.

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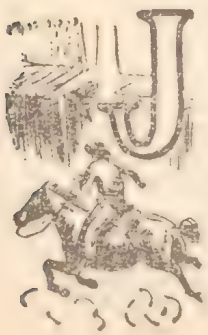
DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

THE RING AND THE STAR

"When I say this place is closed, and you're to get out, I mean just that," Jim grated as he swung.

By Allan K. Echols



JIM Goodspeed did not like the way things had been shaping up in Willow Creek since the gold strike had turned it from a peaceful cowtown into a brawling mob of prospectors and riffraff, hell-bent on a down-grade.

He'd hung up his star, for tomorrow was his wedding day. This was what Ann wanted, and Jim Goodspeed wanted it, too. Then, suddenly, Ann was begging him to take up the badge again...

On this eve of his wedding day, he watched the mob of prospectors with a somewhat sad but detached interest; Jim, he was glad that he had given up the gun and star for a ranch and a wife. The badge was nothing to him any more.

Impatiently, Goodspeed tried to dismiss the town's troubles from his mind; he was marrying Ann Mason, tomorrow; on this last day of his bachelorhood, he wanted only peace and contentment.

He went into Allison's and joined the harried Doctor Mason and his worried friends at a table. John Fontana and W. B. Kummer were there, having their nightcap before going home for the evening, glum and watchful. Business men kept off the street at night.

There was a tight silence at the table as Goodspeed spoke to his f r i e n d s and poured himself a drink from their bottle.

Fontana, the storekeeper, had his watchful eyes moving on the room as he spoke in a tense voice. "Watch this; I believe they're setting a trap for Bob Ray."

Kummer, the blacksmith, looked around and shook his head sadly. "Bob's a fool to come in; he could get killed. Joel Armand has been itching for something like this."

Goodspeed gave tight attention to the almost-silent drama that was building up in the place. There were several miners already playing cards at the two poker tables; other rough men were lounging at the bar. The place was filled with the usual noises and talk of a saloon, but it was a deadly thing that these three were watching.

Goodspeed looked up, just in time to see Bob Ray—the old town marshal—peer into the open window and study the crowd. He had seen Bob's cautious gaze stray to the figure of a man named Ed Mitcher.

Then the marshal had turned from the window with the obvious purpose of coming inside.

Goodspeed turned his own quick gaze back into the room and saw three men at the end of the bar. Joel Armand was the central figure of this group; he was talking in an undertone to two of his cronies—one, by the name of Whitey Welch, and a man named Barber.

Armand, the gambler, had come into Willow Grove on the heels of the strike; by virtue of greater intelligence than other men of his stripe, he had quickly established his place as leader of the crooked element. Whitey Welch and Barber were never far away from him.

Mitcher was a known follower of Armand's. Ed had no visible means of support, and it was open assumption that he lived by robbing drunken miners.

Fontana leaned over and explained to Goodspeed in an undertone. "Bob found another dead prospector this morning with his pockets wrongside out and his head caved in."

BOB RAY pushed his way through the swinging doors of Allison's, and stood inside just a moment while his eyes got adjusted to the light. Old Bob wasn't very spry any more, but he did the best he could in a job that was rapidly growing too big for him to handle.

G o o d s p e e d, becoming uneasy, watched the old lawman walk up and stand beside Mitcher while the bartender measured a pinch of dust out of a leather poke he had laid on the bar. Mitcher looked up and saw the officer beside him through the backbar mirror, and his eyes went dead while they rested on the officer.

Goodspeed drummed the table with his fingers. "Ray's in a trap. Have you fellows got your guns in your pocket?" he asked suddenly.

Fontana said, "Yes," and Kummer, tight-mouthed, nodded.

"If we don't get him out of it, they're going to kill him," Goodspeed said in a low voice. "Armand is the

most likely to do it; I'll cover him. Fontana, stroll over to Welch, and W. B., you pin Barber down."

Silence suddenly blanketed the room. Hard curious eyes turned to Mitcher. Talk gets around fast, and every man in the room knew why Ray wanted him.

The bartender tightened the string on Mitcher's poke and tossed it on the bar. Marshal Bob Ray reached his hand out in front of Mitcher and picked it up just as Mitcher reached for it.

"I'll take care of this for a while," the marshal said in a flat voice. "And you'd better come along with me; I want a talk with you."

Ed Mitcher was of medium height, thick chested and slovenly. He was given over to wild black hair all over his head, face and chest. There was too much of it in his eyebrows, and more of it stuck out his ears and his nostrils. A jackal for a pack of vultures, he turned his dead eyes on the determined officer. "You don't want me; I ain't done nothing."

"We'll talk about that later. Lay your hands on the bar while I pat you down."

The room tightened up, men held their breaths in the silence.

Goodspeed's party slid back their chairs, and Goodspeed stepped softly down to the far end of the bar. Joel Armand was intently watching the marshal.

Goodspeed said, "Have a drink, Armand."

Armand did not remove his eyes from the action at the middle of the bar. He was a tall and slender man, carrying his immaculately clad body gracefully. His eyes were dark and deep, but he had trained his face into the professional gambler's immobility which concealed every vestige of emotion in him. Now he did not even answer Goodspeed's invitation.

The gambler tore his gaze away from the law officer and turned to Goodspeed, who was a stranger to him. "No! I'm busy."

"I know it," Goodspeed persisted quitely, "But pour yourself another drink, anyway."

Again Armand looked suspiciously at Goodspeed, trying to read him. "Just what is this?" he asked coldly. "You're interfering—"

"Yes," Goodspeed answered. "Interfering. I wanted to let you know that if you reach for your gun I'm going to kill you."

The gambler's eyes went to Goodspeed's hand resting on the butt of his low-hung weapon. Then his gaze traveled down the bar to the officer and Mitcher, then came back to Goodspeed's face, all without expression.

"What makes you think I'm interested in that play?"

Goodspeed said, "I'm just making sure; the marshal is a friend of mine."

FONTANA, with a fresh stogie in his mouth, was now standing beside Whitey Welch, who was leaning against the wall inside the batwing doors. A short-barrel, thirty-eight pistol was stuffed into the front of Fontana's belt in plain sight. He stepped directly between Welch and the lawman, cutting off Welch's view of the arrest. "Got a match, Welch?" he asked mildly.

Welch ignored the request, slid aside impatiently so that he could keep the lawman in sight. Fontana casually moved sideways in the same direction, again cutting off Welch's view, and repeating his request for a match.

The gunman swept his hand out to shove Fontana aside. "Get the hell out of my way," he snapped.

Fontana stood his ground doggedly. "Haven't you got a match?"

Then Welch broke his gaze away from the bar and glared at the storeman. "What the hell is this?"

"I was going to ask you what you thought I'd be doing with my gun if you took a notion to join that party."

Whitey Welch's china-blue eyes sought out Joel Armand quickly, and saw the big body of Kummer between

Barber and the lawman. The three toughs were each blocked by a citizen whose hand was within inches of his gun.

Ed Mitcher's black scowl went through the backbar mirror and bounced out at Whitey, thence to Barber, and finally to Armand who was standing at the end of the bar looking studiously down into his whiskey glass.

The marshal had searched Mitcher and had found him unarmed. He saw Mitcher throw Armand a look of appeal, and saw then, for the first time, that he had walked into something.

He saw Goodspeed covering Armand for him; his face went a little gray, and sweat popped out on his red forehead.

Ray looked around for other Armand men, and saw Welch and Barber. He also saw Fontana and Kummer covering them. A deep breath slid out between his tight lips as he saw how nearly he had come to being pocketed. He turned back to Mitcher. "All right," he said, "We'll be going."

Mitcher threw a last anxious glance at Armand and saw the gambler's shoulders shrug slightly; Armand was not going to help. He turned from the bar and went out with the officer, throwing a dirty look at Armand. Old Marshal Bob Ray's jaws were clamped, and his face was dull red. Perspiration ran down the sides of his cheeks.

The silence which had stilled the room now burst into life as the batwings swung behind the departing pair. The bartender wiped his face with the bar towel and said, "Whew! What'll it be, gents?"

Goodspeed tapped the bar in front of Armand with the nail of his finger. "We don't like that kind of work around here, mister; don't try it again."

Then without giving the man a second look, he walked over and picked up Kummer and then went on to the door where he joined Fontana.

THE THREE of them walked up the street as far as Doctor Mason's drugstore and stopped. They were all sober and apprehensive.

"It's going to get worse unless something is done," Fontana said, shaking his head. "Ray's trying to resign. He's all right, but he knows he's too old to handle this kind of stuff. We've got to have a town-tamer or we are done for."

They discussed the situation a while, Goodspeed uncomfortably saying nothing. Then Fontana looked squarely at him. "Jim, why don't you take that job back? You could handle it, and the town needs you. It wouldn't be for long."

Goodspeed smiled. "Not me," he said; "I've had my share of that work."

Doc Mason forced a mirthless laugh. "And besides, he's got to take over my job of supporting Ann."

They threw a few half-hearted jokes at Goodspeed about his impending marriage, and then broke up, Jim going home with Doctor Mason for supper. They did not talk as they walked, each cloaked in his own thoughts. Goodspeed feared they would keep after him to take back the star.

They discussed the matter at supper while Ann served the meal and ate in silent thoughtfulness. After supper, Doc went back to the drug store, and Goodspeed dried the dishes while Ann washed them.

As they cleaned up the kitchen together, Ann was subdued and thoughtful. Jim put a stack of dishes on the shelf, and asked, "What's the matter? You act as though somebody were dead."

"You're not going to let them talk you into taking Mr. Ray's job, are you, Jim?" She answered with a sudden show of fear. "You just can't do it."

"Of course not," he said easily; "I've got enough work to keep me busy, and I've had enough gun-toting."

"But you wore your gun into town today. It's the first time you've worn it since you took off your star three years ago."

"Just a precaution. Willow Creek is getting to be a rat's nest."

"And because you wore it today, you had to use it today. Now you've made new enemies, and so you will have to keep on wearing it. Oh, Jim, why must you do it? Please don't wear that gun again. Suppose something happened to you?"

"Nothing will happen to me. At least as long as I wear my gun."

Ann looked at him in alarm, trying to read deeply into the meaning of his words. "You don't really like to wear it, do you? You told me you were sick of it. Are you sure?"

He hung the dish towel on a nail and took her in his arms. He held her worried face between his hands and kissed her. "I had enough of it, Ann, and I'm not going back to it; that's a promise I won't break. Now get that old happy smile back on your face where it belongs."

Ann kissed him and held him tightly for a moment as though she were still fearful of losing him. "I'm glad you said that," she said in a relieved voice. She pulled herself out of his arms. "You'd better go home now. A girl doesn't go on a honeymoon every day in the week, and I've still got a lot of packing to do."

THE WEDDING was to be held in the community church at ten o'clock in the morning, with W. B. Kummer, who preached on Sundays, performing the ceremony. Goodspeed came in from the ranch at nine o'clock, and when he reached Ann's house he knew that something was wrong.

Ann was sitting by the window with her head resting on her hand and her distraut eyes looking out unseeingly at the distant hills. Doctor Mason was with Kummer and Fontana in the dining room, sitting around the big table, wearing their best suits, and with heavy solemn faces that sent a disquieting warning through him. He sensed that something was wrong.

Ann got up, and when Jim kissed her, she clung to him as though they were in a final parting. Jim felt the muscles taut in her body. He looked over her shoulder at the nervously thoughtful men in the other room. "What's all the gloom?" he asked. "I'm not such a terrible bargain as all that, am I?"

Ann's voice was a sob. "Oh, Jim!" She struggled for control of herself, and then said, "You'd better talk to dad; they want to see you."

He left her and went back into the dining room, and sat down at the table with the men. The doctor shoved the cigar box at him, then carefully bit off the tip of his own, while the silence built up around them. Then the old doctor took a deep breath and began the hard thing he had to say.

"Jim, they've done it. Armand and some of the boys went down to the jail last night and delivered Mitcher. Bob Ray put up a fight; they killed him in cold blood and burned the jail down. They went back to the saloon, killed Moon Allison, then announced that they're taking over the town. They figure you're the key man against them, so you're on the top of their list to be killed. The rest of us will follow, if we don't keep out of their way."

Goodspeed raked the ashes off the top of his cigar with the dead match, knowing what Mason was getting at, building up the resistance he would need in order to keep his promise to Ann.

Mason pressed on earnestly. "I know how you feel. You've had your share of wearing a badge, and it's your wedding day. Nobody can blame you for turning down this job, but there's another side of the question that we have to face. The town is helpless in the face of these cut-throats. We're not gunfighters, and they are. They are thieves and murderers, and

there'll be more innocent blood shed when they get things in their hands. Nobody will be safe."

"There are other lawmen," Goodspeed objected. "Professionals, like I was once. Or maybe somebody in town—"

"No. We've wired every professional we knew, and nobody wants the job. It's probably too rough for them. And nobody around here would have a chance to cope with them—except you. Jim, it's not easy for me to ask my own daughter's husband to take the risk of facing such men as Joel Armand and Whitey Welch. But we're no better than anybody else; we have an obligation to our neighbors. If I thought for a minute I could do the job, I wouldn't ask you. I am not good enough, but I'll stand beside you if you need me; so will Fontana and Kummer. Jim, we owe it to our neighbors."

"I'm sorry," Goodspeed said flatly. "But I can't do it; my first duty is to Ann."

Doctor Mason said, "I've talked to Ann about this. Go talk to her."

Goodspeed got to his feet and went back to the living room, and Ann was standing by the window. He went and put his hands on her shoulders, and she turned and put her head on his chest and sobbed while he held her a moment.

And then with a great effort, she put a stiffness in her body, and it was a physical sign of her getting hold of her emotions and putting a strength into her judgement. She took a deep breath. "Jim," she said, "I believe we ought to do it."

HE KNEW at that moment that she was completely bound to him even in the face of his possible death and the loss of her own happiness. But he could not bring himself to put this risk upon her, merely for the task of relieving his neighbors of their troubles.

"I can't do it," he said. "You come first with me, and I've given my word that I was through with law enforcement."

"That was yesterday, and you were doing it for me. Today it is different. We will be married in a few minutes, then you and I together will have to face our obligations to our neighbors. There is nobody else who can help them except us. We can't let them down, Jim."

Goodspeed was silent a long moment as realization came to him of how great was the sacrifice of her firm convictions that she was making. With a hand in his pocket, he fingered the small box containing her wedding ring. Finally he spoke. "I'm thinking of you now. Do you realize that you might be a widow before the sun set on your wedding day?"

"I am not thinking of myself, now. I don't know how I could live with you gone, but that is the risk we must take. We would never be happy living in the knowledge that we had failed to face our duty."

"Do you really feel so strongly about it?"

"There is nothing about which I feel more strongly. Nothing. Not even my own welfare. If we don't live up to our convictions, how could life have any meaning?"

"All right," he told her. "I felt guilty for turning them down. We'll postpone the wedding for a while."

"No. Just the trip. They need you now."

●

The simple wedding was over. There was going to be a small wedding lunch served at the Mason home by a few of the neighbor women, and now some of the women were there getting things ready. Goodspeed and Doctor Mason were in the living room staying out of their way when Fontana came in, his face red and angry.

"Know what they've done?" he barked. "Armand has had what he calls a voice election. The roughnecks voted him in as mayor of the town,

and Whitey Welch as marshal. Declared the town wide open; both saloons are going full blast."

Doctor Mason paced the floor, then stopped and said, "As far as I know, we've got an ordinance that prescribes how and when elections are to be held. Nobody can vote in a town election unless he's been here a year and is a registered voter; none of those boys have been here that long."

"Of course not," Fontana said. "But that didn't stop them! It's illegal, but they've done it!"

"Then there hasn't been an election," Goodspeed said.

He got to his feet and went out to the kitchen where the women were working. He took down the gun and belt he had hung on a peg the night before.

Ann caught up with him and took his arm. His hand covered hers. "Keep dinner waiting," he said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

He went out into the front room, and there he took off the coat of the suit he had been married in, and stood in black trousers and white shirt. He strapped the gun onto his hip, took the weapon out of its holster and tested the cylinder, then rammed it back home. Doctor Mason reached into his pocket and brought out the star they had taken off Marshal Bob Ray's body. Goodspeed pinned it on his shirt. "I'll be back in a little while," he said to Doctor Mason and Fontana. "You wait here."

Mason got up and moved toward his hat. "I'll just walk down with you." Fontana shoved his hat on his head also.

THE THREE of them walked down to the corner, where Doc Mason left them. Goodspeed and Fontana walked on down the dusty street. Outside the *Owl Saloon* they stopped, and Goodspeed fished a fresh cigar from his pocket, bit the tip off it and lighted it while he gave his mind to the next move.

The *Owl* always had been a hellhole. Smaller than Allison's more respectable place, it was nonetheless a festering spot on the town. It was wide open now on a Sunday morning, a thing not heretofore permitted.

"You wait outside," Jim told Fontana. "Don't let anybody come in."

He turned, went into the *Owl*, and stood inside the door a moment, looking the place over. There were half a dozen miners at the bar, and another dozen at the two poker tables. There were three gunnies in here, sent, Goodspeed suspected, to protect Alex Maple, the owner.

"Close up, Alex," Goodspeed said; "you know there's a law against opening before noon on Sunday."

Alex sucked on his teeth, smiling disdainfully. He smoothed down his slick hair. Then he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Wrong, Jim; there's a new deal around here now."

"No, there's not. Get these men out and lock your door."

"I ain't fixing to close up," Maple snickered; "there's a new law."

Goodspeed crossed the floor in quick stride, stepped behind the bar and caught the surprised Alex Maple by the collar. He got another hand in the man's belt and before the man knew what was happening, Goodspeed had thrown him completely over the bar. Maple's face slid in the sawdust.

"All right, the rest of you, outside," Goodspeed ordered.

One of the three gunnies backed away from the bar and said, "You ain't runnin' this town, friend."

Goodspeed dived at the man and carried him to the floor in one long smooth motion. He yanked the man's gun from its holster, whipped him across the head with it, dragged him to his feet and threw him into his two onrushing buddies who were coming in to join him.

The man's body knocked one of the men down, but the other one came on. Goodspeed said, "Stand back. Damn you, I'm through fooling; get out of here while you can."

The third man came on at him. Goodspeed drew his gun for the first time and crashed the barrel of it across the man's temple.

The man spun to the floor and lay groaning. Goodspeed stood over him and told him, "There's a stage due through here any minute. Be on it." Then he turned to the miners. "That's all, boys, till we open up again."

Goodspeed's white shirt was ripped at the shoulder. While the miners filed grumbling out of the place he ripped the rest of the sleeve out so that it would not interfere with the use of his arm. The last man went out, and Goodspeed followed him and closed the door behind him.

The word had spread like lightning, and now the town full of loafing men collected under the awning in front of Allison's.

Fontana came up and said, "Think we can handle 'em?"

"I'll go and close Allison's. You wait on the sidewalk and watch my back."

Goodspeed started across the street without waiting. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mason and Kummer coming down the block. Doc had gone to his store and picked up his instrument case.

JIM HAD reached the middle of the street when Whitey Welch came out of Allison's and stopped on the board sidewalk. Now Welch shouted to Goodspeed, spreading his legs as he spoke. "I'll have to ask you to drop that gun, mister; I'm the law now."

"Not yet, you're not," Goodspeed answered. "You shuck those guns."

"I'm coming to arrest you," Welch answered.

Goodspeed was standing in the middle of the street, his hat gone and his shirt half torn off. His hair was down in his eyes, and his feet were planted in the dust. "Welch, drop your guns!"

Welch took a few steps toward Goodspeed, then stopped, as though pondering his next move. He turned aside with his head down, moved as to walk down the street, then spun with lightning speed, both hands slapping the leather of his holsters and coming up with his guns.

Welch sent two bullets close to Jim, but Goodspeed's bullet had beat them by a good second. Welch stood rocking in the street; he took a couple of mincing steps to try to keep erect, then fell face down in the dust and died.

But the three shots were merely the preliminary. A fourth one came from somewhere else, and Goodspeed felt burning fire in his his groin. The earth seemed to fly up and hit him in the face, and dust bit into his nostrils.

Behind him, Fontana yelled and fired.

Goodspeed pulled himself to his knees and looked around him. Then he saw the play. While Welch had occupied his attention, Ed Mitcher had emerged from the alley beside Allison's. It was Mitcher who had fired from his half conceaiment.

And it was Fontana who had seen Mitcher and answered his fire; Mitcher fell out of the narrow passageway, and lay on the sidewalk.

Kummer and Doctor Mason were here by now, and the street was lined with people. All those in Allison's had come out onto the walk.

Goodspeed looked at them, then reached a hand up to Kummer. "Help me up and get me on a horse," he said. "Any horse. I can sit up."

Kummer protested, but Jim repeated his request in a sharp voice. Kummer and Mason half-lifted, half-walked him to the hitchrail and boosted him onto a strange horse and put the reins in his hand.

Goodspeed's mouth was set in a tight line. He gripped the saddlehorn with one hand, his pistol swinging in the other. He looked up the street and saw the stage coach coming, and he pulled up in front of it and signaled it to stop.

He rode squarely into the bunch of camp-followers on the walk in front of Allison's. He was a target for any

man who might have pulled a gun, but there was something about him now which overwhelmed these men, which held them under the spell of his dominance.

"You," he said, pointing his gun at one of the gamblers. "Get aboard that stage. And you, over there. All of you. And don't let me see you back in this town again. All right, move!"

THE CROWD shifted uncertainly, like straws in a vagrant breeze, waiting to see which way the wind would blow. One of the men laughed a brass-toothed laugh and said, "Not me. I'm a citizen. Been here forty-eight hours already."

The crowd chuckled and took courage.

Goodspeed called to Kummer. "Load that comedian in first."

Kummer's shoulders were massive, and the strength with which he caught the man and threw him bodily into the stage had its desired effect. It broke up the resistance, and the rest of the undesirables piled into the stage before Kummer could get to them.

"Now keep going with them, Ed," Goodspeed shouted at the driver, "and don't stop till you get to the next town. We'll pay you for the trip."

As the stage driver cracked his whip over the four horses, Jim Goodspeed's handhold slipped from the saddlehorn, and he fell and landed in the dust under the horse's hooves.

As he rolled over and tried to get to his feet, he saw Joel Armand coming out of Allison's. Armand's face was white with rage, and he came at the fallen Goodspeed with determination to destroy once and for all the man who had broken up his play for control of this town.

He snapped a shot at Fontana, which got the storeman in the leg and sent him down and out of the fight. Then Armand came on toward Goodspeed who was up on his knees and trying to get to his feet. Goodspeed didn't make it.

Armand kept coming toward him, his single gun weaving in his hand, intent upon getting so close to Goodspeed that one bullet would finish the job.

Jim slumped back to the ground. Lying flat on his stomach in the dust, he saw Armand's face behind the sights of his raised weapon. Then Goodspeed lifted his own gun and pulled the trigger.

Armand poised still a moment, as though he had walked into an invisible wall. Then his gun dribbled out of his hand. He went down to his hands and knees slowly, delicately almost, and bowed his head, remaining in that position a moment. Then the life drained out of him and he fell with his face in the dust and lay lifeless on the street.

Goodspeed did not see Armand die.

When he regained consciousness he was lying on the floor of Allison's saloon, and the barroom was rocking like a rowboat.

But firm arms were holding him. He looked up and saw Ann. She was sitting in the dirty sawdust of the barroom floor in her white satin wedding dress, holding his head in her arms while her tears dropped on his face.

Kummer and Doc Mason were there stewing around. Fontana lay, beside him, smoking a strong stogie, with a lot of bandage around his leg, and a touch of pride and contentment on his face.

Goodspeed looked at the whole bunch of them, and at his surroundings.

"Not the best place in the world for a wedding celebration," he observed, "but better than the cemetery. Would somebody kindly bring me a drink? A strong one. This is the most strenuous wedding day I ever went through."

"Bring him two," Ann said happily. "He has earned them.

●

Me and Wintergreen figgers we'll clean up teachin' these Eastern dudes how to be cowpokes in ten easy lessons. Then we meet up with Omaha!

Omaha takes my six-gun in both hands like he is chopping wood with an axe, squeezes the trigger, and blasts a hole through Wintergreen's hat-brim!

Easy Money

by Ben Frank

MONEY BEING something we can always use here on the WL range, it is my old saddle-mate and partner, Wintergreen Wilson, who thinks up the idea of us learning dudes to be cowboys by a correspondence course. So we raise all the cash we can and advertise in the big city Sunday papers. *HOW TO BE A COWBOY IN TEN EASY LESSONS BY MAIL*, the ads say. *SEND TEN DOLLARS CASH, PRONTO!*

Wednesday morning at the breakfast table, Wintergreen sops up the last of his molasses with a biscuit and says, "Lywell, leave us up and be going to pick up the answers to our ads."

Looking, as usual, like he is about

to fall apart, he ambles from our ranch house, which also looks like it will fall apart; and I follow. We rope our broncs and begin to saddle. "Lywell," he says, "when yuh stop to think how many dudes there is who wish to become cowboys at ten smackers a head—"

"Easy money," I say, climbing aboard my cayuse.

"Wait," he says. "I forgot somethin' to get our mail in."

He bow-legs it into the house and returns with an empty flour sack. "This oughta hold most of it," he says.

He swings into the saddle, and we head along the trail for Putantake at a easy lope. "Lywell," he says, smiling happy, "only a man with brains would have thunk up this easy way to get rich an'—oh, oh, ain't that Orv an' Neff Paschal cuttin' our trail?"

"Yes," I say, uneasy, for the Paschal brothers are two gents who own the Double-X and go around well-armed and with chips on their shoulders. "But who is the third gent?"

Puzzled, Wintergreen shakes his head, almost losing his hat, which is so big it would fall down over his face if his ears did not stick out like handles on a beer mug.

Presently the Double-X outfit angles up to us. "Hello, boys," Orv says, squinting at us under shaggy red eyebrows. "Goin' places, or travelin'?"

"Going to town." Wintergreen says polite.

"What yuh doin' with that flour sack?" Neff asks curious.

"It's to put our mail in," Wintergreen replies.

"Mail?" the black-haired, beady-eyed stranger says. "You hombres must have a lot of girls writin' you if—"

"We are not getting letters from no girls," Wintergreen says dignified. "Lywell and me are learning people to be cowboys by mail, and—"

"By mail! How'n thunder can yuh learn 'em by—"

"Curly," Orv says to the beady-eyed gent, "Wintergreen an' Lywell have likely been out in the sun without their hats."

Laughing fit to bust a button, they ride away from us. Wintergreen's face, I see, has turned somewhat pink. "Them coyotes," he says indignant, "won't feel so smart after we have took in our first million bucks."

ARRIVING in Putantake, we ride straight to the post office and hurry in.

"Mr. Simmons," Wintergreen says business-like to the post master, "kindly put our mail in this here sack and—"

"What mail?" old man Simmons asks unfriendly.

"The mail for the WL Correspondence School."

"I don't know what yuh've been drinkin', Wintergreen," Simmons says, "but there ain't even a post-card for you mavericks."

Somewhat dazed, Wintergreen and I stagger outside.

"Lywell," he says husky, "do yuh suppose our ads ain't writ right, or—" His voice chokes off, and his eyes widen. "Look!" he gasps.

A stranger has stepped out of the Putantake Hotel. He is tall, bony and loose-jointed, with spectacles astraddle his long nose, and a orange shirt and new Levis held up by a silver studded belt. Seeing us, he seems pleased and removes a fancy, pearl-gray Stetson from slicked-down straw-colored hair. If ever a dude hit Putantake, this gent is it, and no mistake. "Mr. Wilson and Mr. Lilly, I believe," he says pleasant.

"How'd yuh know?" Wintergreen asks flabbergasted.

"The proprietor of the hotel pointed you out. Gentlemen, I am,"—he lowers his voice to a whisper—"Percival Octavius Ogram the Third, but," and he raises his voice for one and all to hear, "just call me Omaha."

Wintergreen blinks bewildered. "You from Omaha?"

"Boston," the gent whispers, "but I don't want it nosed around."

"Don't blame you," Wintergreen says, eyeing the dude thoughtful. "Did you, by any chance, read our ad in—"

"Exactly," Omaha says, a big smile coming to his bony face. "I've dreamed all my life of becoming a cowboy, and realizing the value of personal training, I've come here, instead of writing."

"Comes higher this way," Wintergreen says hopeful. "Fifty dollars in advance."

"Cheap enough," Omaha says, pulling out a wad of bills and peeling off fifty without batting a eye.

Recovering from shock, Wintergreen stuffs the money into a pocket. "Load Omaha on behind your saddle, Lywell," he says husky, "an' leave us go home."

●

"Omaha," Wintergreen says that evening, "the first thing a cowboy learns is to wash dishes."

Omaha blinks unhappy at the dirty dishes, but he wants to become a cowboy something furious. So he sets to work.

"Wintergreen," I say in a whisper, "leave us not crowd our pupil too much. He might get discouraged and pull out."

"Who cares?" Wintergreen smiles. "We got his money."

This is a point, indeed, so I say nothing further.

Later, Wintergreen says, "Omaha, lesson number two is learning to play poker."

"Poker?" the dude says, blinking. "What is that?"

"Get out your money, an' I'll show yuh," Wintergreen says.

Omaha digs out his roll, and Wintergreen runs down a deck.

"Oh, a card game," the dude says, looking pleased. "Back home I held the 'flinch' championship. But you'll have to tell me about these cards. What's this funny looking fellow?"

"That's a jack," Wintergreen explains. Then he tells Omaha about pairs, straights, flushes and so on.

"Dear me," the dude says, shaking his head. "Sounds frightfully difficult; I hope I can catch on."

"You'll catch on," Wintergreen says, dealing.

WINTERGREEN is right about that, and the way the aces keep turning up in Omaha's hand beats anything you ever saw. When Wintergreen has lost ten dollars, he sighs deep and says, "I reckon you've learnt enough cowboy stuff for one day, Omaha."

After the dude has gone to his room, Wintergreen stares at the cards with a deep frown. "Lywell," he murmurs, "yuh don't reckon this jasper knows more'n he lets on?"

"No," I say positive. "He's too dumb to come in out of the rain. He just had a run of beginner's luck tonight."

Wintergreen looks some relieved. "I got thirty ringers left. Maybe tomorrow—"

The next day, we teach Omaha how to ride a horse by himself. The first time, he gets into the saddle backwards. The second try, he kind of gets the hang of it and rides around the corral.

"What do you know!" he says, looking surprised. "Won't be long until I'll be a cowboy."

"Sure," Wintergreen says. "With us learnin' yuh, you can't miss."

Omaha smiles happy. "Certainly glad I came out West and happened to see your ad. Always wanted to be a—"

"Time to learn to shoot," Wintergreen cuts in, not caring to listen to Omaha run off at the mouth.

The dude has never shot a gun. He takes my six in both hands like he is chopping wood with a ax, squeezes the trigger and blasts a hole through Wintergreen's hat-brim. I grab the gun before he can take a second shot; and Wintergreen, his face pale, says, "That's enough sixgun practice for one time."

That evening, Omaha wins another ten dollars at poker. For about half the night, Wintergreen lays in his bunk, cussing. "Lywell," he says, "that hombre's beginner's luck is bound to run out. Tomorrow, I'll win back my money, or my name ain't—"

"Shut up and go to sleep," I growl. "Teachin' that nitwit to handle a lariat has wore me to a nubbin'."

•

The next day is somewhat like the others, only worse. The dude just don't have what it takes to be a cowboy. Once he throws a loop at a fence post, gets Wintergreen by the neck instead, and likes to choke him to death. Later, when we are showing him how to brand a calf, he takes a redhot iron and puts it against the seat of Wintergreen's pants. Wintergreen lets out a howl and jumps over a six-foot gate.

The dude looks like he is about to cry. "Seems like I never will learn this cowboy business," he says in a quavery voice.

That same afternoon, the Paschal brothers ride up, bringing along this beady-eyed gent they call Curly.

"Heard there was a stranger in the country," Orv says belligerent.

"Yeah," Neff says. "Always like to look strangers over."

"Is that him?" Curly asks, pointing at Omaha who is all tangled up in a lariat.

"Omaha," Wintergreen says, "meet Orv and Neff Paschal. They own the Double-X, first ranch south of us."

"Howdy, Dude," Orv says scornful. "Hey, be careful—"

But Omaha's lariat settles about Orv's neck and shuts off his wind. The next thing we know, Orv hits the dust with a thud and a bounce. Cussing, he untangles his throat and stands up.

"Sorry," Omaha croaks, "but I'm not very adept at roping."

"Mebbe yuh're better at dancin'!" Orv bellows.

He pulls his six and begins to blast away at the dude's feet, and Omaha does a Highland Fling like nobody's business.

AFTER THE Double-X outfit rides away, Wintergreen says, "Omaha, them boys ain't to be fooled with. After this, be careful."

Omaha says nothing. He just wipes the clammy sweat off his bony face and stares where the bullets chewed up the ground.

That night, Wintergreen loses his last ten dollars. "Blast it, Omaha!" he yells. "That's no way to play poker!"

"You mean I don't play the game right?"

Cussing, Wintergreen climbs into bed and pulls the covers over his head.

•

The next day, we are showing Omaha how to shoot a rifle when a cowboy rides up and tells us the Putantake Bank has been robbed.

"Three masked men did it," he says excited. "Headed straight for the badlands. Reckon the posse won't be able to find 'em once they get into that country. Five hundred reward offered for 'em, dead or alive!"

"Goodness me!" the dude hollers. "Such excitement!" And he cuts loose with a blast of the rifle that likes to scare the cowboy out of his pants.

"Hold that feller while I get outa here," he yells, and spurs his horse into a dead run.

Looking discouraged, Omaha hands the rifle to Wintergreen. "Seems like I never do anything right," he says and ambles unhappy like into the house.

"No use talkin'," Wintergreen growls, "that idiot ain't cut out to be a cowboy; maybe we ought to get rid of him before he kills somebody."

While we are pondering this question, Omaha comes out, all shaved and powdered up as pretty as a field of

daisies. "Now," he says, "I wish to continue my riding lessons."

"Hop to it," Wintergreen grunts. "But don't get lost."

After three tries, Omaha gets aboard the horse we have saddled for him and rides away, looking like an overdressed scarecrow.

Presently, Wintergreen and I go into the house to start supper. Laying on the dining table, scattered about on an old newspaper, is Omaha's fancy shaving outfit.

"Hum," Wintergreen says, feeling the stubble on his chin, "maybe I had ought to borrow these tools an'—"

His voice ends in a gurgle, and I see he is staring pop-eyed at the newspaper. I also stare at the paper and see a picture of a gent. This gent, it seems, has served five years in prison for robbing the U.S. mails, and has been released recent for good behavior. It mentions that his name is William Black.

I glance at Wintergreen and see his jaw muscles twitching. "Orv an' Neff Paschal call him Curly," he says husky.

"William, or Curly," I say, also husky, "it's him."

"Once a crook, always a crook," Wintergreen says, tearing the picture out of the paper and sticking it into a pocket.

"Them three gents who held up the bank," I murmur, "likely had a change of horses hid in the badlands. They would likely hide the loot and ride back to the Double-X on different horses."

"Five hundred dollars reward," Wintergreen gurgles. "Easy money if we got the drop on 'em while they was asleep, Lywell."

I UNLEATHER my gun and examine it closely. Wintergreen does likewise with his six, and then picks up the rifle. Without a word, we go to the corral, saddle our horses and ride south. We take our time, so it is pleasantly dark when we leave our mounts and cut through the cottonwood timber that surrounds the Double-X buildings. All is quiet; not a light anyplace.

"Maybe they ain't home yet," Wintergreen whispers nervous.

"Maybe they have gone to bed," I whisper also nervous.

We ease up to a side window and peek in, but see nothing whatsoever, for it is darker inside than out, which is very dark, indeed.

"Now, what'll we do?" Wintergreen whispers. "Slip in an'—"

There comes a sudden noise from behind, followed by a dull thud and a groan from Wintergreen. Before I can get my gun from the holster, my head explodes, and I see numerous stars whirling around and about. The next thing I know, I am in a lighted room with my hands tied behind my back very uncomfortable. Glancing about, I observe Wintergreen propped in a corner, his hands also tied behind his back. He is somewhat pale and staring fearful beyond me. Turning slightly, I see what he is looking at. Orv and Neff Paschal and Curly Black. Curly is scowling at a piece of newspaper, which I recognize as the picture of himself, and feel a slight chill creep along my spine.

"Ain't no question about it," Curly says harsh, "they're on to us. That's why they was snoopin' around."

"Can't understand why they'd bust out a window an' wake us up, an' then hang around till we caught 'em," Orv says.

"What're we goin' to do with 'em?" Neff pipes up.

"If a couple dimwits like them have caught onto our game," Curly says, "no reason why others won't see my picture in a newspaper an' catch on, too. Ain't safe here for us no longer."

"The thing to do," Orv nods, "is get out while the gettin's good. We'll pick up the stuff an'—"

"What'll we do with these baboons?" Neff persists, eyeing us in a way that ties my insides into knots.

"Take 'em as far as the badlands

an' let 'em have it," Curly says. "No one'll likely find 'em there."

"Killin' never appealed to me," Orv says with a shudder. "Even when Neff an' I was helpin' you before yuh got arrested an' sent up, I was always against killin'."

"That ain't neither here nor there," Neff says. "We can't leave these two snoopers go back to Putantake an' tell the law—"

"I ain't squeemish about killin' 'em," Curly says.

They haul Wintergreen and me to our feet and push us out into the cold darkness. Soon we are all mounted and on our way.

DAYLIGHT finds us riding into the badlands and winding through great washes and gullys and climbing over landslides.

I look at Wintergreen, and he looks at me and sighs deep. "Lywell," he says faint, "leave us resolve never to earn a fast dollar without working honest for it. Never again will I take advantage of a dude, or—"

"I'll say yuh won't," Curly pipes up, chuckling unfunny. "Hold it; this is the place. Fall off your hosses, boys."

Wintergreen and I dismount, and Neff slides from his saddle and digs two old spades from a pile of dead brush. The next thing, we know, they have taken the ropes off our hands, and we are digging what looks like our graves. But it turns out we are digging up the bank loot, which they buried here. All too soon, we have uncovered a wooden box wrapped in an old slicker.

"Thanks, boys," Curly says, pulling his gun. "Now that we no longer need you, I'll—"

"Hold it!" a voice says grim.

Turning, who should we see but Percival Octavius Ogram sitting astraddle his horse, holding twin black-handled sixes in steady hands.

"The dude!" Orv says, and makes a grab for his gun.

But there comes a blast from Omaha's right gun, and Orv forgets all about going for his weapon. In fact, all he can think about is the bloody hole in his right hand.

"Take those ropes and tie the varmits up, boys," Omaha says calm. "And much obliged for helping me pin something on the Paschal brothers. Always before, they've been too slick for us. This time, it'll be a different story."

"But—but—" Wintergreen gurgles.

"Sorry I had to fool you," Omaha says, "but when I ran across your ad, I saw a chance to live close to this nest of skunks without arousing suspicion. Brought along that old newspaper, thinking maybe I'd want to show Curly's picture to someone. As soon as I heard about the bank holdup, I guessed these coyotes had done it; but had no way to prove it; so I left the paper where you'd be sure to see it. Figured you'd make a try for the reward. Rode to the Double-X ahead of you. Aroused the sidewinders by throwing a rock through a window. Wanted 'em to find you and get scared. Followed you out here where the loot was hidden, and—"

"Just who are you?" Wintergreen manages to wheeze.

"Percival Octavius Ogram, Special Deputy Marshall, but just call me Omaha for short." Then, grinning cheerful, "Too bad you boys didn't capture these owlhooters so you could collect the reward."

●

IT IS THE next day, and Wintergreen Wilson and I are sitting at the breakfast table, sopping up molasses with our biscuits. It is Wintergreen who breaks a long, gloomy silence.

"Right decent of Omaha to give me the money he won in them poker games," he says.

"Easy money," I murmur.

Wintergreen chokes slightly, hangs his big hat on his beermug ears and walks out, cussing.

WAS HE YELLOW?

By C. C. STAPLES

He was no story-book hero, and the odds were too great. Bill Nelson's only hope of saving his father was to hightail it to town for help!

Nelson had to make a run for it, hopeless as the attempt might be...

AS HE CAME down the winding trail out of the hills from the cabin, making toward distant Modoc Town with his horse at a driving run, Bill Nelson had a vague regret. He started to pull up and turn back, then leaned forward again. Some folks might even have said that he had acted yellow when he headed for town and the Sheriff after spotting "Hawk" Devlin, "Paint" Grogan and some other hombre he had never seen before—finding out that they had taken his father captive, were determined to make the old man reveal the location of his rich, free-gold claim. Well, maybe Bill should have gone at them smoking—taken a longer chance.

And then again, he had to play it safe. He *had* to. With him out of the way, the old man was as good as dead. Bill Nelson was pretty good with a gun, but he was no story-book hero, no wonder-worker. And with three gunnies against him—three to one; that was fool's odds. No, after all, maybe he had been smart.

He pulled in a little, swung around a turn, then suddenly glimpsed motion, dust, riders at the next turn. He wheeled his bronc out of the trail,

still at a run, and pulled up in a tall, thick clump of mesquite. Maybe they hadn't seen him.

Bill was grinning, but it wasn't just exactly a grin of mirth that twisted his face. That grin of his was as characteristic of the man when he got himself into a tight, as his breathing was. And right now he certainly was in a tight. How they had headed him off, when he had last seen them at Pop's cabin, he didn't know; but he had just spotted "Hawk" Devlin and "Paint" Grogan, as they cut into the trail ahead of him and turned toward him.

He stood very still in the brush, his hand on his gelding's nose to choke off a whinny if Buck got the scent of the two horses closing in on his hiding-place in the mesquite. Bill heard the trampling of the two broncs, now, as they came closer. They halted frequently, moved slower, and he thought, *Those two skunks sure must have spotted me before I wheeled off the trail. They ain't just guessing where I am.*

At first neither Devlin nor Grogan spoke; they were tense, watchful. Bill knew that by the way they came on. Then he heard the black-whiskered Grogan's growling bass boom out from the side of the hill to his right, "There he is, Devlin! I see 'im! I can see that roan bronc of his in the brush. I told yuh it was him we spotted comin' down the trail." Grogan was up on the side of the hill about a hundred and fifty yards away. Bill could see him squinting down at the mesquite brush.

Devlin's smooth, quick voice came back, "You sure, Paint? Don't shoot wild and warn 'im off. We got to get 'im now; he already knows enough to hang us." The tall, skinny gambler was plainly nervous.

"Yeah. It's him, alright. If I can plug his horse, we got 'im cornered. But if he ever gets to the Sheriff with what he knows... I'm lettin' him have it when I spot 'im again."

QUICKLY Bill led his horse ahead a few steps in the heavy growth, hoping to deceive Grogan, but the close-in boom of a big 45-70 broke the echoes quickly. A slug crashed through the brush farther down the line; he had Paint fooled.

Bill Nelson's roan jumped nervously at the boom of the big Winchester. He wheeled away from where Bill held him by the nose and crashed into a dry thicket of dead branches. Instantly, both Devlin and Grogan knew just where he was—where Bill was, too.

"There he is! You missed him. Can you see 'im now?"

"Shut up, Devlin," Grogan yelled. "You're close to 'im. You want to draw his fire? That bucko can shoot!"

"Go on, Grogan! Drill 'im! If old Pop gets loose while we're sashayin' around the country like this, he'll..."

"Aw hell, he won't got loose. Ain't we got Pete Brace watchin' im? And we sure got this hombre too. After we kill his horse, we can close in and drill 'im."

"All right. All right! But let's hurry this up and..." The sharp whang of a 30-30 came from where Devlin had been yelling, a little farther up the canyon, and Buck screamed in mortal agony, reared wildly away from Bill Nelson. The bronc was hit. Hawk Devlin had shot him—must have suddenly gotten a glimpse of the horse as he danced around in the brush, in his excitement.

Black-haired, gray-eyed Bill Nelson was slender, powerful, as agile as a cougar. He leaped clear of the wild scramble of thrashing legs and tossing head. He closed in fast, out of reach of the horse's flying hoofs, yanked his saddle gun from its scabbard on the left side of his saddle. He was away from the wounded horse and diving fast for a shallow cut bank, in a shower of hot lead that scorched the brush from two sides. He made it, unhit because neither of the riflemen had really seen Bill.

For the moment, Bill was safe. That quizzical grin of his spread over his lean, close-shaven face, but again,

there was no mirth in it. He started going over his chances, in his mind. *It's eight miles to town,* he thought. *Two miles back to the cabin where Pop is. Devlin and Grogan have good broncs and they've put me afoot.* He mulled that over for a minute. Then, *I'm sure in a tight this time. Gotta get out of here some way and turn old Pop loose from Pete Brace; Brace might lose patience and kill the old man; Pop is pretty stubborn and might work 'im up. Hell! Any low-down polecat that'd deliberately shoot a horse like Devlin did...If I don't get clear of this mess...Maybe Devlin and Grogan'll sneak back to the cabin when I don't know it and put the screws on old Pop. They'll make 'im tell where all that free jewelry-gold is coming from. That's what they want; only thing that keeps them from killing the old man is they never would find it, then. Hell! Why couldn't Pop have registered that claim, instead of triflin' along like he did, week after week, putting it off? Lucky I came home when I did and spotted that skinny gambler Devlin and the others.*

●

BUCK HAD gone quiet now, dead at last from Devlin's murderous 30-30 slug. Grogan's big 45-70 roared, pounded its heavy slug in the mesquite and Devlin's 30-30 sent out its sharp whang. But, somehow they seemed to be just making idle gestures. Neither Devlin nor Grogan could see anything to aim at; they seemed to be just throwing a bluff, to keep Bill in the thicket.

Bill looked at his big silver watch and was surprised to see that it was nearly four o'clock; it would be dark soon.

An occasional blast continued to crash out for the next half hour from the big 45-70, but the 30-30 had gone quiet at last. Then suddenly it dawned on Bill that Devlin had quit firing entirely. Devlin maybe was trying to save shells, and at the same time keep Bill from leaving—let him know that they were still there.

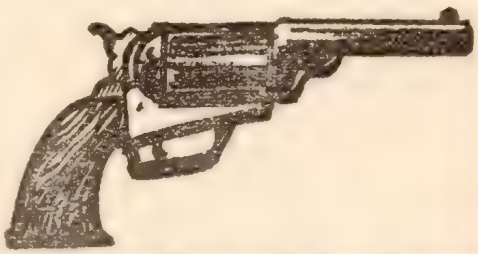
Then it hit him with a jolt; Devlin might have gone back to the cabin—he and Pete Brace might be working on old Pop, might be torturing him.

Realization of all this brought Bill to his feet with a leap. He had been checking the spot from which Grogan

A Powerful New Book-Length Novel of the Old West

GUN-WOLVES' RANCH

by Lee Floren



You'll find it complete in the big February issue of

WESTERN ACTION

was firing. It was off at right angles to the trail—to the north of it, he thought. Bill hit the back-trail at a run, moving uphill. He ran quietly but swiftly and held his rifle ready and cocked; high brush screened him from Grogan's position.

Coming to a sharp rise in the trail, where it turned to the right, he crouched, moved cautiously, keeping a sharp lookout to he north. He stopped, searched the brush where he figured Grogan would be. Minutes passed; he couldn't hear a sound. Bill saw nothing, grew frantic with the suspense and waiting; but he dared not leave, head for the cabin on foot with this dangerous enemy, mounted, in his rear.

Then at last, out of all patience, he jumped to his feet and went at a trot up the trail, his rifle cocked and ready. A hundred yards, and he was brought to a sudden stop by the sharp, pungent smell of fresh cigarette smoke drifting across the trail.

Bill hit the dirt, as Grogan's big 45-70 roared, not fifty yards from him. The drop to the ground fooled Grogan. Bill was unhit; he rolled over, fast, caught Paint Grogan in his rifle sights, squeezed the trigger.

From a half-crouch, Grogan struck the ground in a forward dive. Bill levered in another shell, lined his sights again, waited. But Paint Grogan didn't move; he was dead.

Grogan's bronc was tied in the brush, close, and half an hour later Bill Nelson had left the horse, in the gathering darkness, and sneaked up close to the back of the cabin.

HE HEARD voices inside, stood listening. Then, with startling suddenness, a wild shriek of pain came from inside. It was Pop's voice. He heard old Pop cursing Devlin savagely. The stink of burned flesh drifted through the window as Hawk Devlin snarled, "Come on and tell me what I want to know. Tell me! Tell me! I'll burn your damned carcass in half if you don't."

Bill drew his guns, peered in through a corner of the window. Old Pop was tied in a chair, naked to the waist. A fiery red brand showed on his back. As Bill looked, he sagged limply against his ropes, unconscious. Devlin stood back, an old cattle branding iron, glowing hot in his hand; there was a roaring fire in the cabin stove.

The sight drove Bill Nelson wild, killed all thoughts of the chances he took—two gunners to one. He cocked the hammers of both six-guns as he went at a dead run around the cabin to the door.

There was deep dust around the cabin, as part of a road. Bill kept to it, ran noiselessly. The door was closed; he didn't hesitate, crashed inside.

Devlin and Pete Brace wheeled as Bill burst in. Two pairs of hands dived for holsters. Six-guns sprang level, blasted.

But Bill was moving fast across the end of the room, both guns blazing. He saw Brace stiffen, slide to the floor. It was he and Hawk Devlin for it now, and Bill was savagely glad. He stopped suddenly, jumped back toward the door. A slug from Devlin's gun cut across his ribs under his left arm but it didn't bite deep. It stopped him short, though, slammed him against the wall but that gave him something to lean against. He cut loose—right, left, and saw Devlin stagger, wheel waveringly for the door, and he threw another well aimed shot at him.

Six feet short of the door the tall, thin gambler faltered, strength left his wiry body. He dropped his guns, pitched full length on the floor.

The fight was over. Complete surprise had turned the trick for Bill Nelson; he holstered his guns, cut Pop loose, lowered him carefully to the floor.

There was a can of axle grease on a shelf, and as Pop commenced to stir and groan, Bill plastered his burn generously with it, tied on a crude bandage.

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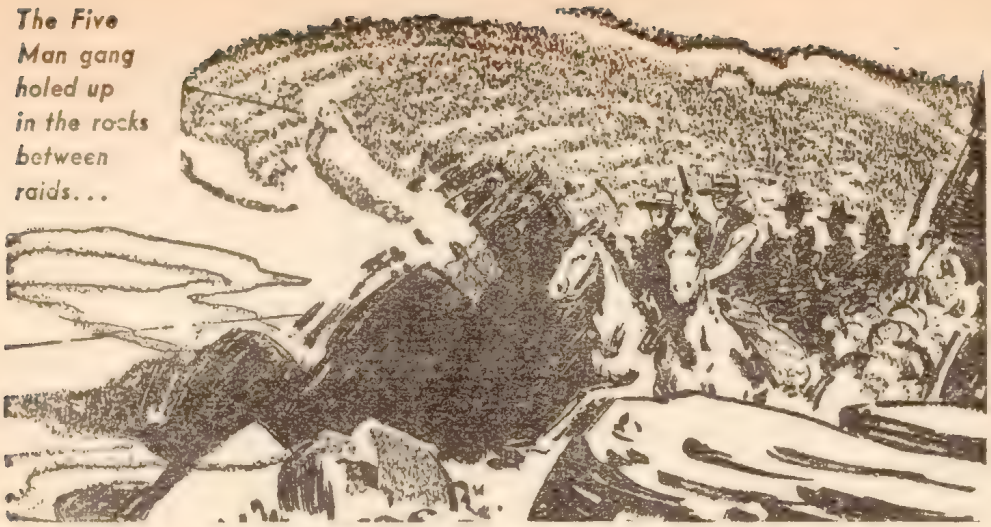

The Five Man gang holed up in the rocks between raids...

The Vindicators

By A. A. Baker

DAWN RAISED the curtain of night, swiftly. The mountains arose from obscurity and gazed groggily at the new day. High-mossed trees, lining the stage road, lifted their shadows before the prying sun and exposed the hiding place of Sheriff Buck Travers.

The Sheriff's face was strained from a long night of intent watching and listening; he rubbed the back of an aching neck and climbed stiffly out of the ragged clump of Manzanita bushes. Red berries crackled under his boots and he brushed sticky leaves from his trousers.

The sun had dissolved the gloom and Buck grimaced in disgust, knowing that, by now, his prey was holed up in some shady canyon and that his night of waiting was wasted. The Five Man gang struck only at night—at night when the settlements were deep in sleep. They never struck when the sun could point out their escape by exposing a dust-flung trail.

The Sheriff tracked down his hobbled horse and, mounting wearily, trotted back towards Blairamee. His mind was disturbed by misgivings. There was the possibility the Five-Gang might have raided Blairamee in his absence by approaching from the

Buck Travers' father had been shot down, and he'd avenged that killing, years before. Now, as sheriff, Buck had shot this youngster's dad, and he couldn't blame the boy for reacting the same way Travers himself had, back in the past. The youngster had a right to vindication, even though the sheriff had killed in the line of his sworn duty, and in self-defense...

long trail over the Donners. They were tricky. Never touched a stagecoach. Limited their cavalry-like raids to the more isolated towns of the high mounains. Five, bullet-slinging marauders that killed and looted without waste motion.

He trotted into town and the cheerful greeting from the *Hygrade's* swamper eased his worry; before the sun had begun to draw cold steam from the leaking water trough, he had shucked his clothes and was fast asleep in the room back of the split poled jail.

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Two hours later, the sheriff strode firmly down the board sidewalk toward the *Hygrade* saloon. The pint-sized swamper, who had wakened him, jiggled excitedly beside the muscular, gun slung peace officer.

"The barkeep, he sent me." Swampers didn't often get close to a fighting sheriff and Harry's bugged eyes plainly spoke his pride. "The barkeep said to run like the devil an' get the Sheriff. They's a big fight goin' on, an' looks like them strangers is bustin' up most of the old *Hygrade*..."

"Sure. Sure, Harry. I'm hurryin'; now run along." Buck voiced an absent-minded thanks. His gun holsters glinted in the sun as he pushed them further down on his heavy thighs.

"One of the fellas," Harry's voice cautioned, "is real tough. Big scar, kind of a burn like, under his ear. He gave me two-bits to rub his horse. The little one...partners they look like... is carryin' a brush-gun. Carries it like another fella'd carry a cane, hung down with his fingers in the trigger-guard."

The sheriff grunted, and Harry hushed his babbling and tried to match stride. He tried a nonchalant slouch. He was going to be part of a real ruckus, right along with Sheriff Buck, the gun-fightingest lawman in the whole Donner country. He had been bringing in desperate men for the last twenty years. Had seen the live ones hung, and the dead ones buried.

The little swamper studied the unheeding sheriff. He was big, big all over—maybe better than two hundred pounds. His heels were run over from the weight. Hands with rope broken knuckles. A hat patched to cover bullet holes. Whiskers short and red in a wire-like stubble that would likely rub a hole in a canvas bedroll cover. Gunbelts slicked with saddle-soap and sweat until the bullhide rippled like silk. Two guns, faced front so they could be drawn cross handed. The sights filed off. Harry's reflections scattered as Buck shifted his chew, spat, and muttered. "Get along now buttons."

WITH THE professional flip of a man knowing his job, the sheriff took the two steps easily and the batwings popped behind his back and left the swamper standing on tiptoe.

Hygrade saloon fights were commonplace to Buck Travers; he had made his entrance a hundred times. Step through the doors, make them snap and bang, noise usually denotes authority. Move quickly to the right, like someone else is following, throw a quick look at the bartender. If he's crouched, then the other fellow's going to draw or is holding a hot gun.

The place was quiet. Buck grimaced wearily as he studied the postured men like a butcher studies a hind quarter before he makes the first bold stroke of the cleaver.

Harry's described "real tough" fellow stared at the sheriff. His short partner held the brush-gun, and Buck noticed the stock was shattered. He knew how, when he saw the black-jack table leaning crazily against the smoke-stained wall and the dealer holding white hands to a blood-soaked head, sitting weakly on the balcony steps.

Brush gun muttered, and Buck caught the words, "Throw down on him 'fore...". "Real Tough" made a

wry face but kept his hands on the bar.

The sheriff moved heavily forward. "Keep your hands off your guns." Brush-gun snarled, and scooted sideways; the sheriff drew. His target buckled as the slugs tore holes in the chambray shirt and errupted against the wall behind the small man. The broken rifle hit the floor, then everything seemed to move with the deliberation of a snail's pace. A cane-backed chair whirled across the floor, and caught the sheriff at the knees. He was still moving forward so he toppled in that direction while his slugs tore into the floor and splattered sawdust in a vagrant streak of sunlight. He landed on his side, and felt the sixguns taken from his hands.

"Real Tough" had him by the throat and the sheriff threshed violently, to get free of the talons that tore fiercely at his windpipe. He felt the hands relax, and lunged to his feet. But the hands became sledges that smashed against his face until he could see the blood splatter out. His breath whistled as he chopped a gnarled hand against his opponent's neck, followed by a smart heel palm against the younger man's under jaw. The planned blow was ill-timed, because he was caught off-balance and a haymaker hit him hard in the stomach, and bent him double with the pain. Buck Travers wasn't even thinking now; he was being battered and was reaching desperately for a hold on something. A hold to pin the younger man's arms was his only desire. To stop those hammer blows until his sick stomach and glazed eyes could recover.

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THE ROOM smelled of arnica. As Buck's senses readjusted, he recognized Doc Bloomer's back room. He was laid out like a knife-puntured drunk; he muttered, and tried to sit up.

Doc Bloomer turned swiftly from an instrument cabinet and spoke with medical authority. "Lay back there 'til I get through."

"I'm all right, Doc..." Travers began but was interrupted harshly.

"All right! That's what every blood-soaked, gun-beat varmint says fust thing. A doctor spends half his danged life learnin' to patch up folks, then ever'body what gets hurt says, 'I'm all right Doc.' What'd you know 'bout it? You're out of commission for awhile. One of your thumbs is broke; you got a concussion; maybe some internal injuries..." Doc snorted. "Lay back."

The sheriff felt his stomach contract and obeyed. He puzzled while his thumb was splinted and his bruised face swabbed. Fury ran like grit through his voice when he spoke. "How long'll it be 'fore I can ride out after that maverick? Which way'd he leave town?"

Doc Bloomer's chuckle held irony. "He ain't left town. You been out for 'bout fifteen hours, colder'n a turkey. He arranged a burial for the little brush-gun man, then set himself up in Reeves' boardin' house. Guess fightin' sheriffs don't scare him none."

Doc Bloomer patted the sheriff's tired shoulder and frowned. "I'm leavin' now. You lay there 'till I come back. Man your age needs time to get over these things. Case you're interested," he added, "that fella's name is Snapper Buckles."

Buck watched the door close and he lay in the darkened room. The defeated always lie alone. They need the darkness to fight self-pity; they need the time to build up a crust of bravado that will turn the caustic or wondering looks of folks that are always quick to desert the vanquished.

Buck rolled a shaky smoke with his good hand and studied the red glow, as he fitted his thoughts together. His mind roved back over the past. Been head man ever since he had first seen Blairamee. Walked into town twenty

years ago, alongside his father. A string of fur laden mules, furs from the head of the Snake River. He had seen his father shot for the price of those furs. He had done some shooting himself and wound up with a badge pinned on his shirt. Lean and mean then, but he had run his town fair, and gone on to take over the county law enforcement. The few bullet-scars still needed an occasional scratching...

As he shifted position the cot squeaked and, for the first time, he felt the heavy mantle of age. He ran his good hand over his waist and felt a roll of fat. He reached out for his gunbelt and counted the irregular buckle holes. Holes punched at odd times, to allow the belt to stretch with his broadening hips. Buck chuckled bitterly. Looked like he had spread out with the town...

THE DOOR banged open and the sheriff rose to face the two men who entered. Suspicion and distrust bloomed as Buck studied their set faces before they spoke. Conroy, chairman of the county commissioners, snapped harshly. "We come direct from a special meetin' of the commissioners. They was a vote taken..." his voice faltered briefly under the steady gaze of the sheriff, then continued... "Johnson was there." He directed a fat hand toward his companion. "We took that vote to have you turn in your star."

Johnson tipped back his wide white hat and hooked greasy thumbs in his belt. "Figgered any sheriff that'd get whipped in a bar-room brawl couldn't be much use tryin' to enforce the law. Hidin' away from that Buckles gunfighter; lyin' in here, with Doc Bloomer posted outsde with a riot gun is mighty bad. Mighty cowardly. The commissioners sent us for your star an'..."

"Doc!" the sheriff shouted furiously, "Doc, come on in here."

The Doc's big feet pounded through the front office and he stuck his long face through the door. "What'sa trouble, Sheriff?"

Travers stared at the short barreled shotgun that hung down from Doc's long arm. "What the hell's comin' off? What're you doin' with that gun?"

"I told you to be quiet. These two botherin' you?" Doc raised the gun and pointed it toward the politicans.

"Never mind that," Buck roared; "what're you doin' with that gun?"

"Sittin' out in the front office, lookin' out the window."

"Why?"

Doc shrugged and answered. "The fella you killed..." then added hastily ..."strickly in the line of duty, was named Buckles too. The young Buckles called him Pa."

Before the sheriff could speak, Commissioner Johnson interrupted. "That's one reason we're here. We can't stand for legalized murder an' that gunfighter won't stop 'till he kills you—or maybe you kill him. It...it..." Johnson's voice faded, not sure now of all the reasons that had been so freely expressed at the commissioners' meeting. For the first time, he seemed aware that the sheriff really didn't know he had killed Snapper's father.

"Don't seem any solution," grunted Doc. "What's the good of either one gettin' killed? Sheriff, here, was just doin' his job. Why, he must'a broke up a hunert fights in the *Hygrade*. From what I heard, the older Buckles was carryin' a brush-gun by the trigger-guard, an' splintered the stock on that crooked card sharp. When the sheriff arrived, he had to shoot or get shot. Pop Buckles was still wound up an' madder'n a coyote, when Buck busted into the Hygrade. What's botherin' *me*, is why the boy didn't draw on the sheriff. Just went fist-fightin' crazy. The fellers say..."

"Never mind, Doc, never mind." The sheriff's voice was resigned. "Now, get...all of you...get out an' let me alone." He turned his back and

heard the men clump through the front office, then heard the outer door close and a bolt shot home. The creak of a chair told him that Doc was again stationed at the window.

Bleakly, Travers slumped on the cot and tried to reach a solution. This seemed to be one of those cases where a set of circumstances knit themselves into a hair shirt that scratched the wearer raw; then dug into the nerves until thinking was almost impossible.

Maybe Snapper had the right to come gunning. Didn't a man have the right to avenge his father's death? Hadn't Buck himself been a vindicator? Gunned the men that killed his own pa? Shot lead into the murderers' quivering bodies until his own loss was somewhat assuaged. Probably Snapper was sitting up there in Reeves' boarding house right now, peering out the window, waiting for his father's killer to leave Doc's office.

ALTHOUGH twenty years had passed, Buck could remember the salt in his mouth and the heat from his gun barrels. He could still see his father's anguished face, before it pitched into the mud of the alley. Snapper Buckles didn't have to look back twenty years; less than twenty hours ago Pop Buckles had died. But Snapper had those long hours in which to brood and build up his hate of a gunslinging sheriff.

The sheriff recalled how much a boy's pa can mean to him. The time he had shot his first cougar. Standing bravely in front, holding his fire until the cat paused for the leap, but knowing his father stood a few feet away and holding his fire because he was learning the boy. The shy smile of pride when the cat came down. He recalled the big, sure hands clipping his hair with a skinning knife. Passing the tin dipper to the boy when they would stop at the well, after a hot day in the wood lot.

Buck sighed heavily. Young Buckles must be sitting up there, thinking like thoughts of his father. Buried in the hill cemetery but unable to leave those reminders under the red drift. Reminders and memories that wouldn't be sacred until Snapper put hot lead into Sheriff Buck Travers' fat hide.

Slowly, the sheriff rose and unhooked the star. He watched the trickle of blood swell into a little bubble on the ball of his thumb. He never could take the danged thing off without jabbing himself. He winced, as his splinted thumb banged Doc's instrument cabinet, and felt half naked as his hand came away empty and the badge winked back at him in the gloom.

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Reeves' boarding house had seen better days. Snapper Buckles rubbed lean, restless fingers over the foot of the iron bed and idly chipped the enamel, already broken by the spurs of predecessors. He was a rugged young man with features that might have been chiseled from the roughest crag of the bleak Rockies. His shoulders weren't wide and rolling, but hunched in raw muscle, almost to his ears, throwing bony arms out from his sides. The rough gun belt carried one scarred gun, that he had to reach down to draw.

On rare occasions, when a man is quite alone, a tear will blink into his eye. Sometimes, when he is full of some brave feeling, it can be through pride. Sometimes, through the loss of something close. Snapper still heard the echo of the gravelly dirt he had thrown on his father's coffin.

Maybe he *had* brought on his own death, at the hands of that gun-slick sheriff but, the old man had had a lot of good in his wiry little body. He always had thought he would die by the gun. He would say, "T'ain't much use livin' clean, don't make a bullet change it's course." Poor little devil wouldn't have lived long anyway. Sit-

ting half the night fighting the pain of his belly.

Snapper shook his head resolutely, his intense feeling erupted into words that slipped around the room as though seeking an ear. "Problem is, what's my next move? Any man standin' by an seein' his pa killed, is supposed to do some killin' hisself." The words died to a whisper, but his thoughts carried on. He knew the sheriff was doing only what he was supposed to do. Called in to stop a bar-ruckus and shooting started. When he stepped through those doors and saw the old man with a busted rifle, he had to draw when the old man made a move. Snapper smiled grimly at his next thought. If that sheriff hadn't been quick, getting that hogleg out of his holster, the old man would have plugged him for sure. He used to say, "A brush-gun is a mighty mean weapon, boy. Don't have to draw a rifle, just carry her by the trigger guard an' point her. Sure faster'n gettin' a sixgun off'n your hip."

Snapper whirled and stared out the window. It was past midnight. A light was on, down the street in the Doc's place, where they had carried the sheriff. The shadows of the false fronted buildings, and the porches that shaded the boardwalk from the moon, covered a few deeper shadows. Nosy townspeople, waiting to see the end of the ruckus. They wouldn't interfere, just watch the excitement. Be able to brag how they had seen the end...of either the sheriff...or the fellow that had beat up the sheriff.

It was a long way down that street. Somehow, Snapper knew the sheriff would start up its length, when Snapper started down. They would meet. Well...people would be surprised; he grabbed his hat and stamped from the room.

DOC BLOOMER never moved from the window. He just watched the sheriff walk by and open the door. Doc had seen many men expose the flesh of their body to gunfire in order to protect a resilient, smarting pride. Buck Travers had taken a terrific physical beating, scars that would heal and disappear, but Doc knew his scarred pride needed knitting in some crucible of action. So Doc sat and stared at Buck's back as he walked up the middle of the silent street. To himself, he nodded without surprise as he saw a shadowy figure appear form the shadows of Reeves' and advance. It was like the stalking approach of two mountain cats but, something was missing. Doc sensed that hate was lacking. He half raised from his chair. He had heard a charge of horses.

They came up behind the sheriff, in the formation of calvary charge, and Buck turned and caught a slug in his shoulder before he could get his guns out.

The Five-Gang rode down the sheriff and, whooping wildly, met the blazing gun of Snapper Buckles. His hunched shoulders bent over the blazing, spitting gun, and the street was lighted by its studied fire. There was a banging roar from the bandits' guns, like popcorn on a hot stove but through the thirty second din, came the unbroken rhythmic bong of Snapper's gun.

As Doc said later, "It was like a ringin' of funeral bells. All that shootin' from them bandits didn't seem to hurry Snapper one bit. He just planted his feet in the middle of the street and shot the Five-Gang right out'a their saddles." At this point of his narrative he would frown and confess, "I just stood there at the window with a loaded shotgun, like a big eyed bullfrog, an' never fired a danged cartridge!"

Doc Bloomer spent the rest of the night prying the slug out of Buck's shoulder. As he left the sleeping sheriff and stepped out into the street, with the intention of heading for a

Another Fine Story by A. A. Baker
"DIGGER JOHN'S BOMBS"
is in the April issue of
FAMOUS WESTERN

needed drink, he halted, and woke Snapper Buckles from his seat on the boardwalk.

"The sheriff's sleepin'. Better come have a drink."

"Figure I'll set here awhile. Take a holdover on that drink."

"All right, boy, but tell me somethin'..." he studied Snapper's face. "You don't like the kind'a fella would hold his fire. Was you gonna let the sheriff shoot first?"

Snapper started, then stared quizzically at the doctor. "How'd you guess...?" He dropped his eyes. "I can't really tell you, Doc, an' now, I'll never know."

Doc Bloomer laughed, and slapped Snapper on the shoulder until the dust rose out of his shirt. "You're two of the craziest critters I ever heard tell of That danged sheriff went stompin' up the streets with empty guns. If them Five-Gang raiders—Lord rest their plagued souls—hadn't rode up, you an' the sheriff'd sure looked silly. Him with empty guns, an' you waitin' an' holdin' your fire 'till..." The Doc's laughter got away from him and he hung on the porch post helplessly tangled in it.

Snapper grinned slowly, and waited until the older man regained his breath. Then he asked. "Sheriff who'd go out with empty guns might need lookin' after; suppose he'd be interested in hirin' a deputy?"

That was too much for the Doc. His laughter rolled in peals down the street. Snapper sat patiently until Doc was r e d u c e d to a hiccuping reply. "Dunno, lad. Except he'll be happy to give you a job as deputy but looks like you shot away your chances. Ain't gonna be much work for the sheriff. now you put the Five-Gang into boothill." Doc Chuckled. "Wait 'till he wakes up, then we'll see."

Snapper relaxed, and watched Doc Bloomer bustle happily up the boardwalk.

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It is one of the superfine stories in the February issue of

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SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY

Silvertip Majesty

by Harold F. Cruickshank

Nels Lafonde had sworn to get Mukwa, the great grizzly. But the silvertip was king in his own realm...

MUKWA, THE big grizzly gave out a short cry as a fiendish lance of white hot lightning stabbed through a cloud mass to strike with vicious force into a nearby lodgepole pine-swale. Every fibre of the silvertip's great body quivered. He rose to his haunches, heavy tusks dripping froth. Now he rubbed a grotesque dome with a forepaw and whimpered softly.

Once, several years ago, in this same rugged Big Horn country, he had been gravely injured in an electrical storm, his scalp had been horribly torn.

Nomadic Indian and white trappers in the Big Horn wilderness knew from experience that Mukwa feared no living creature, no element, but that he was afraid of lightning—the cause of his old injury. There was an Indian who claimed to have seen Mukwa's great scalp rise. This was possible, since he had been injured in fly-time and his wound not allowed to heal properly...

It shifted now, this strange moveable scalp.

A fearsome flash of close-in, forked lighting struck. Scarcely had the thunder crashed when Mukwa sniffed a strange scent. It was said that he feared no living creature, but whether from instinctive dread, or respect, he quivered when he caught the whiff of close-in man scent. Not at any time was the big one possessed of good vision; his sight was the weakest of all his senses. But his sense of hearing served him well, with his sense of smell.

Mukwa whirled and rushed as a human being raised a Winchester, and fired. Nels Lafonde, crippled in one leg as a result of a fall along his trapline two years ago, while escaping from Mukwa, had sworn one day to end the reign of the king silver tip. Knowing Mukwa's fear of lightning, the trapper had trailed the big one and had approached him with the stealth of a mountain lion, while the storm was at the peak of its fury.

For all his eight hundred pounds of bulk, Mukwa was swift. He clacked his great tusks as he lunged. Then a sudden, strange explosion detonated in his eardrums, stopping him momentarily in his tracks. He felt the shocking impact of something tearing through a shoulder-muscle, but he drove on; Lafonde was slow with the lever mechanism of his rifle.

As the man attempted to go whip clear, in behind a clump of stunted alders, he slipped and took a glancing blow from a terrible forepaw —a blow which sent him headlong into the scrub brush.

Mukwa rose, snarling, coughing in great pain and anger, but a sudden terrific bolt of lightning striking nearby checked his rush on the fallen man. Lafonde was saved a further battering, perhaps fatal wounding, as old Mukwa spun and went limping on along the canyon bottom.

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Lafonde stumbled and fell — just in time!

DAWN FOUND the big one still resting; his sleep had been fitful because of the pain in his wounded shoulder.

Dawn found Lafonde, the trapper, staring dully at the clearing sky. He groaned from his hurts, and dared not move. It was thus he was discovered by an Indian the following day, and help was brought in. He was carried out to his main cabin and a week later went out for proper medical and surgical attention. When, finally, his son called to see him—young, swaggering Red Lafonde, horse hunter, cougar hunter—the young man stared, wide-eyed, at his father, whose face was drawn, hollow-cheeked and as ashen as in death.

Red Lafonde chewed savagely on his teeth. Again the big silvertip king had struck! He now shot a white-hot glance at his father. "I'll get him, dad," he said, "if it's the last thing I ever do. I'll hunt him down, day an' night. I'll put my cougar hounds on his trail, give him no rest, an' when the time is right, I'll blow a hole in his heart as big as a coyote hole!"

The elder Lafonde slowly shook his head as a mirthless little smile tried to tuck up his drooping mouth corners. In a weak-toned voice, he tried to dissuade his son—albeit Red was a good hunter, with lots of experience.

Another tried to dissuade Red. He was Narcis Buffalo, an Indian with whom Red elected to stay.

"Mukwa, heem the evil wan, Red," Narcis said slowly. "Twice he keel my best cayuse. Mukwa mus' eat big food, but he bad medicine for man. Once Mukwa attack man, lak your fader—he is no longer afraid of man. Ayaie! Only a fool would go out on trail of the beeg wan—now he is wounded."

It was the longest speech the wise Old Narcis had ever made, but it brought only a determined grin to Red's thinned mouth. "He ain't the first silvertip I've gotten," Red countered. "I've clipped down an eight-hundred-pounder before this... Anyhow I aim to get this Mukwa; I'm takin' his trail with my dogs, the two half-wolves, and the others."

Again Narcis shook his head; he shrugged as he reached for his buckskin tobacco pouch. "Your fader best white man guide in the Big Horn countree, Red. But heem fool, too. Wan time mebbeso I fin' you half froze, up in a pine tree..." Narcis grinned, but not with any degree of mirth... His old squaw, busy cooking on the small tin stove, gave a toothy grin and nodded. She agreed with the wise Narcis, for her knowledge of the power of such huge creatures as Mukwa, was equally great.

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Flies of every known pestiferous kind harassed Mukwa, as he limped about his range. When he attempted to rest, to sleep, they swarmed about him, giving his wounded shoulder muscle little chance to heal. He was forced from place to place. Only up in the high country, where there was still snow on the rocky slopes, did he find peace from the fly hordes; but in such levels there was no food suply.

At times, after a couple of hours of hard, one-paw digging, he succeeded only in whetting his appetite the more with a small rodent. Thus, his great sides became flabby and gaunt.

Across his trail every now and then, as he moved from place to place, he tanged the hated scent of man and dog creatures, and another scent that caused his blood to grow hot and cool off by turns. This was the scent of Tarat, the wolverine—devil of the hinterland—and a barren mate with which he ran. The wolverine pair, greatest pilferers in all the wilderness, had cut the silvertip's trail and like jackals of the jungle country were following, hoping for the big one to make a kill.

Ordinarily, Mukwa would have blown an expression of contempt of these wily hellers, but wounded, he had a deep respect for them—and in fact, a sense of fear. There were few wolverines left in the Big Horn country, but Mukwa had run afoul of Tarat and his kind more than once, and knew of their fighting power and their hypnotic power over a wounded creature which they trailed with unbounded patience until the moment arrived to strike... Even a creature as big as a moose had been known to fall prey to Tarat and his kind; more than once members of Mukwa's kin had given the "skunk-bears" a wide berth.

Mukwa was forced to a greater alertness, now, as he ambled on down toward the lower rangeland in search of food. Cunningly, he shifted his bedground from time to time, and, whenever possible, blotted out his trail by wading up or down shallow mountain streams; but always he tanged the man scent blended with that of the dogs.

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SLOWLY, with infinite patience, the man, Red Lafonde, followed the silvertip's trail—only to lose it from time to time. He held his eager hounds and the half-wolf dogs in

close check. There was no need to hurry; besides, a wounded bear—especially one of Mukwa's size and temper—was a danger at all times. He could become a terrible threat to the dogs, if they bayed him, before Lafonde could reach them.

For two weeks, Lafonde kept to the baffling trails, but before long he discovered that the dogs had lost a lot of their keenness for the hunt. He found it necessary, at times, to use means other than gentle cajoling; he had to force them into activity. Lafonde was puzzled. Never before had the dogs shown such unwillingness to hold a cougar or bear trail...

The dogs had a keen sense of smell. They had picked up the dread tang of the wolverines. It was not the silvertip's scent they feared, but instinctively they were wary of contact with Tarat and his kind...

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Mukwa was able to find the curative sedges of a nearby marshy lake in which he rolled; while the cool ooze and water washed out his wound, he plucked at an occasional leguminous root, which he devoured with great relish.

Daily, he took the cure baths, alternating between them and thorough washing in a mountain stream. Though he felt better, he still limped, every now and then the sharp pain from a nicked nerve-end brought him up frothing at the mouth in a surge of bitterness and anger.

Diurnal of habits, he rested each night, now and then glimpsing the evil, glowing eyes of the wolverines...

His temper now became a greater festering sore than his wound; froth mounted to his chops and flecked to the ground whenever the presence of the evil ones disturbed his rest.

Now he began to circle his backtrails. The man and dog scent was freshening; Mukwa exercised all his cunning, but he could not go on much longer without food. He had not had time to rebuild his fat supply since his emergence from hibernation; shortly he would have to take bold and drastic measures in finding a big kill.

The sun was splashing the broken, scored rock-faces of the mountains in a mad fantasy before setting; in the canyons, purpled wraiths went into their pre-twilight dance, as Mukwa rolled on toward a short box canyon.

He chortled throatily now for, clear above the tang of man and dog scent, he caught the delectable tang of cattle. A small band of whiteface cattle, young stock, were grazing on a lush flat, not far ahead; wisely, Mukwa circled back to scout his backtrail before he stole in with great caution toward the unsuspecting herd... He had placed the wind in his favor and now, with the stealth of a mountain lion, he weaved in under cover of a fringe of wolf-willows.

Almost belly-down, he peered through a port in the scrub brush and his piggy eyes blinked sharply as his nose quivered. There, alone, a long yearling heifer grazed; Mukwa's body began to quiver.

He crouched lower as the unsuspecting beast moved toward taller, more tender grass at the fringe of the willows, then suddenly Mukwa bunched his huge body and rushed. The shock, the surprise alone, almost toppled the young whiteface, before that smashing forepaw blow broke her neck.

Mukwa gave out small whimpering sounds as he lowered his head and drove his big tusks in to work at their grim surgery.

Shortly he was belly-down, ripping, tearing. Ordinarily, on making a kill, he did not at once gorge himself, but preferred to scrape rubble around the carcass, leaving it for a day or so. But his gnawing hunger forced him now to fang out parts of

the most tender meat, which he gulped eagerly.

All at once he whirled, for alien scent bore down on him. He wanted to roar defiantly, and with warning, but wisdom prevailed; he seized the youngling heifer in a powerful jaw-hold and half carried, half dragged her away, with ease. He moved on across a flat, into and along a shallow creek.

CLOSING dusk found him deep in a sere, fire-killed pine-swale, as those two grim hellers—the wolverines—came up to begin their encirclement of him and the kill.

Tarat and his kind carry a host of nicknames, not the least appropriate of which is "Glutton." Among the most active of all the wilderness creatures, their hunger was sharp at all times.

Mukwa turned his big head, his piggy eyes glowing, as he followed the movement of the squat, striped pair. Their persistent trailing of the silvertip king had robbed them of many an opportunity to hunt and kill for themselves; now, with the tang of fresh meat so strong in their nostrils, the hot blood of desire pounded through their system. Isk-Tarat, the female, was the bolder of the two; her mate had to whirl and threaten her as she coiled, to rush in toward the heifer's carcass.

Mukwa was up on his haunches, wholly alert, towering above the wolverines. In the dimming light he could see no great distance, but his keen nose brought him the freshening tang of the man creature and the dogs.

Mukwa dropped to all fours. Ignoring Tarat and Isk-Tarat, for the moment, he set to work to tear out most of a hind quarter of the young beef. Tarat, stole in, belly-down, at the far side of the carcass, but Mukwa was alert. He whirled and lashed out with a forepaw. Tarat caught a glancing blow in a shoulder.

Instantly, Mukwa clamped a jaw-hold on the part quarter of beef, and whirled away, to make good speed in spite of the handicap of his load...

It was at that moment that Red Lafonde set his hounds free. "Go get 'im!" he yelled, as he jerked up his rifle, ready for instant action.

The hounds hesitated, at first, but the two hybrids—the half-wolves—leaped to action. It was then Red's eyes widened, as he glimpsed the shadowy form of a wolverine coil to counterattack one of the big dogs. Now Lafonde knew why his hounds had been so reluctant to follow the trail of the silvertip king.

ISK-TARAT was in fierce action. She coiled onto her rump then, snarling fiercely, lashed out with her four-set battery of terrible rowelling claws. With a hollow yelp, one of the hounds tottered back. The man groaned; one of the hybrids was down, groveling, dragging himself belly-down toward the scrub brush.

Then came that stench! Tarat and his mate had begun to spray the zone, and Lafonde coughed sharply. He moved swiftly to one side, to get to clearer air, then turned. A hound was yelping in pain. Isk-Tarat had clamped an unbreakable fang hold on the dog's throat.

Red threw up his Savage, sighted, and fired. From under the furry scramble, old Tarat emerged but, though wounded, he managed to whirl away as the man fired...

When the man called up his dogs, only one responded; he came in, head low—one of the hybrids—with an ear hanging.

"Carcajous! Nom d' un chien!" Lafonde swore in French, a language he had almost forgotten and only used a such a time as this—a time of stress. He moved in and turned a handsome hound over with his foot, hoping there would be some sign of

life left; but the female hound, the best of his bunch, was starkly dead.

Lafonde stood staring into the deepening gloom, cheek muscles dancing as he chewed his teeth in his frustration... Mukwa the silvertip king, had completely outwitted him. It seemed to the man, albeit he was well-experienced in the ways of the wild creatures, that Mukwa had deliberately left the wolverines to fight a rearguard action for him, to cover his escape.

Lafonde had lost heavily, but his loss fanned a strong fire of desire—desire to continue the hunt for Mukwa. This became an obsession, but there was nothing more to be done till daylight. He must get his remaining, wounded dog back to camp and give attention to that torn ear. But with the dawn...

The man tightened his hold on his rifle, until his knuckles wanted to burst through the skin. "Tomorrow—" he said hoarsely, and his tight lips stirred as they framed an oath he did not utter....

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Meanwhile, deep in the rugged craglands, Mukwa cached his meat-supply, then, circling over a wide area—searching for danger sign—he at last backed against cliff wall and subsided to rest, while his half-filled belly grumbled now in semi-contentment.

Every now and then, Mukwa was disturbed by a whiff of Tarat's scent, but snarling softly, he stretched out and shortly his snores sounded, sending small rodent life scuttling from the zone...

Though he knew that only one wolverine trailed him, Mukwa was no less vigilant. He held no fears for himself, but sensed, instinctively, that while Tarat was on his trail, his food supplies would be rendered, in part, at least, unfit for his consumption. Tarat and his kind had no scruples about fouling a kill—the kill of another—with his stench.

As the summer moved on, and Mukwa's shoulder strengthened, he roamed over a wide range, in search of food... Food became more and more important to him as autumn approached; he would need heavy tallow under his hide against his long sleep in hibernation. But since the killing of the heifer, man and his kind were doubly alert. More than once when he ventured down to the cattle range, Mukwa had been turned away by strong man-scent, and by the discovery of carefully-laid traps.

Forced to almost continuous exertion, as he dug for marmots, gophers, and other rodents, often unsuccessfully, his sides grew gaunt and his temper soured. The wild range was changing its drapery tints, now, as autumn approached; Mukwa came snorting out of a sleep this morning to find a light, white frost covering the craglands.

As the sun rose, he sat on a rimrock shelf and blinked at the dazzling effect of the rising sun on the rolling cattle range far below. Each aspen and birch, wild fruit, and wild rose shrub, stood glistening in its delicately tinselled glory.

Save that the first frost struck him sharply, as the forerunner of the freeze-up, when he must find a den for his period of hibernation, old Mukwa was not concerned with the beauty of the panorama.

Already he had whimpered when whorling snows had coiled around the mountain peaks. The first frost set up a storm in his brain... He must have food, big food for tallow making, under his hoary coat and hide.

IT WAS THE sudden high-pitched bugling of a bull below that brought sharp decision to Mukwa. But back of his off side shoulder, a knot of hard cartilege twitched as if to remind him of a goring he took in his youth, when forced to join battle with a longhorn bull in the breaks.

He rose to his full height, champ-

ing his jaws, now and then flailing empty air with his massive forepaws, as if forcing his gorge to rise to fighting temper. Again that shrill piercing bull call sounded. It sounded as a challenge, a challenge which Mukwa accepted with a deep-chested roar.

He dropped to all fours and weaved from side to side as the foam grew on his working jaws. Then he turned and began to amble on down an old rock and clay side, to a level below. He moved with great caution, pausing every now and then to search for danger sign. He weaved along draws, up into dense thickets, taking his time, time even to dig up a mouse family which served as appetite stimulants.

Now and then he whorled, snarling as the fresh tang of his persistent follower, Tarat, struck his nostrils, but the wolverine chieftain kept himself screened in the deep underbrush.

Tarat, the wise one, seemed to sense that, as Mukwa descended from the craglands, he was out on a foray. While the big silvertip clung to the higher levels, Tarat had taken himself off to hunt vigorously for food on his own; now he was ready to follow the big one, ready to take over in his own right, Mukwa's kill.

Mukwa crossed a creek on a riffle bar. He paused here to search for a possible fall run of fish, but save that he tanged fish now and then, he was unsuccessful... Grumbling, he ambled on, until he held up, chortling with pleasure, as he caught the fresh scent—that inviting steamy scent—of cattle ranging close by.

Mukwa subsided to rest in a thicket. He blinked his piggy eyes, as he lay through the last of the afternoon in the shade. Now and then he clacked his great teeth as he snapped at a gaudy moth hovering within range of his jaws.

A red squirrel chirred impudently above in a lone spruce tree, but Mukwa paid no heed... No longer was he concerned with the small creatures.

When at last the wind chilled, and shadows began to deepen in the thicket, Mukwa rose, shook his great coat and moved on through the brush. As he circled the area, he glared up at the mountain faces, now a riot of glory as they caught and toyed with the last on the sun's westering capers.

Suddenly he started, and crouched as from close in came that bugling of a big bull...and then, a brush crackled.

Mukwa spun in his tracks, and rose to his full height as a handsome, powerful young Hereford bull broke through the breaks, bawling his challenges and threats. The weight of the bull more than doubled Mukwa's weight. Those horns were a threat indeed, but the old silvertip king gasped answers to the bull's challenges.

He blinked, as he watched the Hereford chieftain begin to hoop up turf, casting it over his back. Tongue lolling, the bull gave out deep-throated blats.

All at once Mukwa's nose quivered sharply. It had caught the hated tang of wolverine scent; then a sound came which caused the bull to whirl. It was a hollow bawl from a cow. The bull lunged through the breaks, and by a circuitous route, Mukwa followed.

Now the silvertip king came to a halt, rising. His every nerve fibre quivered as he glared at Tarat, the wolverine. The striped devil of the wilds had a paw on a newly-born calf—a handsome little creature he had just slain.

Tarat's face was distorted in a grimace of hatred, and of warning. He was baying both the bull and the cow...and for long moments neither dared advance to attack him.

Mukwa dropped to all fours and weaved with the silence of a mountain lion, as he held a line of wolf-willows between his great form, and

Tarat, at the kill. The rangeland valleys rang with the piercing bugles of the bull, and the throaty cries of anguish from the cow.

WHEN THEY advanced, Tarat snarled and made ready to coil and lash out with his raking rowels.

Slowly, carefully, Mukwa inched forward. His small eyes were now like two embers being fanned to glowing flame. Strong in his brain was the inherent hatred of this skunk-bear, Tarat. The great wisdom of Mukwa, developed down through nearly twenty years, was serving him well now. He sensed that Tarat was a stouter enemy than any other creature in the wilds—a devil indeed, capable of doing terrible damage.

High grass grew at the edge of the willow fringe. Mukwa was crouched behind this, glad of the breeze which set up a covering rustling sound which would mask whatever small sound he made. Slowly, surely, he moved forward, and prepared his reflexes for action. He bunched his great pads beneath him, then suddenly, with a terrific roar, he lunged.

Cow and bull wheeled away with shock. Tarat, forced to keep the cattle creatures in sight, was slow as he spun. But spin he did and as the great head of Mukwa came down, he launched a terrible, clawing, tearing counter-attack.

Mukwa almost rocked back. A searing pain in one eye almost forced him from the engagement, but he rallied his fighting forces, and bored on in. His great jaws struck and clamped a hold on the writhing wolverine's throat and those jaws closed until, giving out his frightful stench, Tarat, the greatest combatant of all, hung limply.

Coughing, snarling, Mukwa now raised his massive head and flung it sharply to one side, sending the dead wolverine hurtling into the brush. Wasting no time, Mukwa sneezed Tarat's stench from his nostrils, then rushed in to seize the calf.

There was an instant stir by the cow and the bull, but Mukwa was on his way, the gangling calf no great handicap as he tore through the brush.

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He had not gone far before he heard the alarming drum of hoofbeats. He lunged across an open flat ridge between two belts of brush, and in that brief space of time he was suddenly struck sharply in his old loose scalp. Came the shocking crash of man-made thunder. Mukwa, whose right eye was damaged to a degree of complete impairment of his vision in that eye, hurtled blindly on, Tarat's kill still clamped securely in his jaws. He heard man-made voice sounds, and this spurred him to his best effort of speed.

Again and again, when his big form showed in his spurts across open patches, he heard the sharp hiss and whine of lead. Another bullet tore through his hide along the right flank, but was not a serious, deep wound. It served, however, to sharpen his wits as he made his break for freedom, escape.

His head-wound bothered him most, for a nerve had been nicked; every now and then, he almost stumbled forward as he seemed to lose control. At last, he struck a creek, and swung upstream, until he reached flat rock, where he turned abruptly at right angles to the stream to commence a climb up into the nearest spruce timber belt.

AT THE SMALL forest he paused to rest. He moaned softly as he laid down the calf carcass, and backtracked to search for danger sign. The sign he picked up alarmed him: man was not far behind.

Red Lafonde quivered with bitterness and hatred. For some time he had given up his hunt for Mukwa's trail, realizing that the old silvertip had kept close to the inaccessible higher mountain slopes and shelves.

But he realized that, as autumn began to encroach on the late summer, he must take up the hunt again; he knew that Mukwa would be forced to make a big kill or two some time before he finally denned up.

It was with this in mind that Lafonde had ridden out toward the breeder whiteface herd of a neighboring rancher. Now, though, he swore bitterly as his stout bay gelding found the climb difficult.

Lafonde was keenly alert. He could tell by his bay's action or reaction, just how close he was in on the heels of the silvertip.

When at last the horse shied, and snorted in terror, Lafonde sensed that the time had come to go on alone, afoot. He realized, too, that Mukwa was wounded and would be a threat at every moment as he reached the timber. But, Red refused to give up now; Mukwa must be killed. Shortly, in the gathering dusk, the man came across fresh sign—sign that told him Mukwa had, only a short few moments ago, laid the calf down and picked it up again to resume his flight deeper into the timber's gloom...

Darkness closed in swiftly now, and the man was forced to reach a decision—either to return to his home, and resume the hunt at daybreak, or to camp out the night. He had no bedding with him, but the night was moderately warm. He elected to remain, make camp at the spot at which he had hitched his gelding.

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The grim atmosphere of the wilderness became charged with foreboding, as Lafonde settled back against the bole of a tree to rest. He started at every small sound, and the wild country was alive with small sounds, whispers and gasps, and stirrings throughout the night.

Now and then an animal startled the horse, as brush cracked; Red tightened his grip on his Savage, ready in an instant to go into action, should the horse become the subject for attack by lurking cougar. There was little rest for the bay; his keen nose brought him sharp whiffs of bear scent. Now and then, he whirled, on his catch rope tether, bringing the man to his feet as he snorted.

Mukwa, though he was accustomed to bedding down during the nights, was astir tonight. Using his keen sense of smell as his guide, he moved slowly, as he back-tracked. Winds were fickle in the broken country and he caught occasional whiffs of the man creature and the horse. He associated such tang with his wounding; but it was his fear of further attack that sent him circling the man's camp.

Now he crouched, to watch, to wait.

With the coming of daybreak he became sharply alert, as he heard the man creature stirring.

He cocked his massive head and listened to receding footfalls and the crackle of dry windfall brush as the man moved away, on toward the deeper timber.

When the man scent had faded to blend with the general fragrant scent of the wilds, Mukwa rose and moved slowly forward. He shook his hurt head, and paused to gently touch his wounded eye. Then a sharp fury possessed him; with a muted snarl, he rushed.

The horse whirled on his picket rope and lunged, tearing free, but Mukwa displayed a speed that belied his bulk and his hurts as he rushed—half rose—and drove a fierce forepaw smash which caught the bay going away, in the flank.

The horse screamed in terror as he went crashing into underbrush. Mukwa roared. Here was a chance to exact a toll of vengeance....

THE MAN had heard, though. Lafonde whirled and hurried back. Again and again, he heard the wild terror-cries of his gelding. They

spurred him to action, to increase his pace, and shortly he came to a halt, as he watched the big grizzly king rise.

Red could hear his bay struggling in the underbrush. This attracted his attention, but now he swung; Mukwa had shifted position, screening himself by brush.

The man plunged forward, his rifle at the ready, but suddenly he froze at a crash of brush at his back. He attempted to whip to one side, throwing up his rifle in the same movement, but a foot rolled on a smooth windfall twig. He was toppled off balance and unable to save himself from a fall sidewise into the underbrush, as Mukwa charged by.

The rifle had spilled from Lafonde's hands; there was no chance of retrieving it, for Mukwa had whirled back. The horse was now tearing down a slope at breakneck speed, whinneying in terror as he sped...

Red scrambled to his feet and dived in behind a clump of stout alders as Mukwa roared. The man picked out a lone upland spruce and darted towards it. He had barely swung his legs clear when bellowing, old Mukwa charged him...

Legs and arms wrapped securely around the tree-bole, at the first forked limbs of the spruce, Lafonde quivered as he heard the slobbery snarls of the old silvertip king below. He heard those great tusks at work as, in his fury, Mukwa chewed bark and great slivers of greenwood free....

An hour later, his body cramped and aching, Red Lafonde was still clinging precariously. Mukwa was still prowling, mouthing his guttural curses below. Another hour past, and Lafonde was swathed in cold sweat, when suddenly, Mukwa rolled on his stern and went crashing on through the timber.

A rifle crashed, repeating shot after shot.

Lafonde half sobbed as he heard footsteps and breaking brush. He glanced down to see his friend Narcis and a younger Indian. Narcis jerked a fresh cartridge into the breech of his Winchester as he strode up. His face was expressionless as he glanced up at Red.

"You come down... Go home now," he said in a dull monotone. "Heem, Mukwa, bad medicine, lak I say. You forget heem, yes?"

Lafonde nodded sharply as he struck the ground. "Yeah, Narcis. Reckon I was foolish. I—listen! That's Mukwa!"

There was a crash of brush near the timber's edge. Old Narcis shrugged. "We fin' your horse when we come look for trapline for winter. You go now, yes?"

Lafonde thanked his friend and turned away to pick up his Savage. Shortly he was moving on down to where Narcis had tied the bay...

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Up in the timber, Mukwa frothed at the mouth as he moved in on the remains of the calf carcass. He seized it, and gutturing his curses, moved on, climbing steadily up through the timbered country toward a favorite old rocky shelf, where he would rest.

Never had he gone out of his way to molest man. But as soon as his present food supply was done, and his wounds healed, he would go down again in search of food; Mukwa grunted thickly with a sense of retained majesty as he now dropped to feed.

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Only non-lethal violence was to be allowed until after the election.

BALLOTS or BULLETS

by John T. Lynch

The little town of Como had to best Virginia City in some way, and Hap O'Riley had a famous plan. Here is a hilarious, true story of the old West.

THE LITTLE town of Como was openly jealous of the bang-up celebration which Virginia City staged on the night of October 31, 1864, on receiving official word that "Uncle Abe" Lincoln had proclaimed Nevada a full-fledged State of the Union.

Virginia City had more men, more firearms and more firewater than the much-smaller neighbor. But this was small consolation to the boys of

Como, who had to admit shamefully, that they had been out-rioted, out-rowdied and out-hell-raised in general by the bigger Comstock Lode "city." Even the Como casualty list of dead, dying, and merely maimed was infinitesmial when compared to Virginia City's score for the big night.

The citizens of proud Como held a town meeting on the following day. Something had to be done...

Hap O'Riley, an erstwhile miner who could talk convincingly on any subject—whether or not he knew anything about it—was chosen to address the gathering.

"Gents," orated Hap, "today our Civic Betterment Committee scum a scheme whereby we can outdo Virginia City on one thing, at least. That is, Como can vote a full hundred-per-cent to re-elect Abraham Lincoln in the votin' next Tuesday. That's one week from today. We got 134 men qualified an' registered to vote—also two cows an' one horse. This totals 136 votes. If every one votes for Uncle Abe, we can out-do the Virginia City boys if we work it right."

O'Riley went on to explain to the attentive throng that each town had so many registered voters—and a 100 per cent vote could be tallied only by having the full and exact number of legitimate votes cast for a single candidate. He felt sure, he said, that all of Virignia City's qualified names would not vote. "Because, the way they kill each other, over there, in their sinful ways, some of them voters is goin' to be in boothill before election day."

Then Hap came to his main point. "This means that every man we got registered has got to be alive and votable on election day. So, from this minute on, until election is over, there will not be one gun-fight, knife-throwin' bee, nor any other lethal ruckus indulged in by any person in Como. Fights will be settled peaceful-like; argyments will be hashed out without th' help of bullets. Our motto, until next Tuesday is: *Keep peaceful. Keep alive. Love your neighbor*—until after election day—*like it says in th' Good Book.* We owe it to Abe and to Como to out-vote them rowdies in Virginia City."

Amid cheers, the boys of Como unanimously voted to remain alive and intact until their votes were cast 100 per cent for Abraham Lincoln. To help them keep their noble promise, they decided to check all weapons with the sheriff until the fateful day had come and gone. Guns, knives, brass-knuckles, ice-picks, blackjacks and other assorted deadly tools were cheerfully piled high on the custodian's desk. For the first, and only, time in its history, the men of Como went unarmed.

The dove of local peace and brotherly love hovered over Como. The dove smiled—in an amazed sort of way—for almost the full week. Then it had to drop the olive branch and fly sadly away, simply because Albert Atwill took advantage of the serene situation.

ALBERT ATWILL had long been practicing a method of palming aces. Not a professional gambler, nor card-shark, Albert had long been afraid to try his system in a regular game. But now, on the night before election day, Albert decided he could safely try to win a large pot in his dishonest manner. Albert got into a high-stake game in *Kelly's Saloon*, after making sure that his opponents were positively naked of weapons.

Although Atwill had thought his sleight-of-hand tactics had been perfected, he was wrong, he fumbled his two extra aces at a crucial moment...

Herman Lang, seated directly across from Albert, had been drinking a bottle of beer. With a quick motion he cracked the bottle on the edge of the table. The bottom of the bottle crashed to the floor, leaving Herman holding the jagged neck of the glassware. He jumped up, leaned across the

table, and slit Albert's throat from ear to ear.

"You shouldn't of done that, Herman," said another of the players; "Albert is a registered voter."

In his hasty and impulsive act of resentment at being cheated, Lang had completely forgotten about Como's 100% quota of votes.

"Come on, help me," Herman said, kneeling over the bleeding voter. "We gotta' get Albert sewed up; if he dies he can't vote!"

In the little makeshift hospital, Atwill under expert care of Doc Piper, hovered between life and death all night long. The entire town remained awake and anxious. Bulletins on the patient's condition were issued at regular intervals; the folks coudn't bear to think of missing the 100% for Lincoln goal by one vote.

The polls could not be opened, legally; until seven o'clock; election officials from Virginia City were on hand to enforce the rules. And at six o'clock —just one hour too early—Albert Atwill died.

As word spread throughout the anxious town, and it became generally known that Como had been deprived of the benefit of one vote, an ominous crescendo of grim mutterings grew apace. *Hang the man responsilbe for Albert's untimely demise! String Herman up! Lynch him!*

A "committee" of miners was hastily appointed to attend to Herman. They found him, sound asleep, in his cabin. Ordered to dress, he was marched up the main street to the great oak tree at the edge of town. Just as the noose was placed around his surprised neck, Herman found his voice. "You're fools to hang me right now," he said; "this way, you'll lose another vote. Why don't you let me vote first?"

Herman, of course, was stalling for time. He realized that, within another hour the temper of the town would cool off somewhat, and he might escape the hangrope. He was happily correct; released from the noose, he was taken to the polling place, *Kelly's Saloon.*

Herman Lang cast the first vote of the day. "Hurrah for Uncle Abe!" he cried. "Now I can die happy!"

Herman's attitude made a hit with the crowd. Besides, he had thought up a great plan, which he whispered to some of his captors shortly before he voted. His idea would save Como's goal of 100% for Uncle Abe.

"Look," Herman had pointed out, "these election officials from Virginia City only got here a short time ago, I hear. They don't know what happened last night, and they don't know that Albert is dead. Why not take a ballot up an' let Albert vote, anyhow. After that, th' Doc can announce to one and all that Albert is gone, but not forgotten."

Herman's scheme was carried out. The gullible officials, assuming that the sheriff was an honest man, permitted him to "take a ballot up to a man who is awful sick."

As Como's hospital was also its

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Coming Next Issue

DOUBLE AMBUSH

Feature Novel

by C. H. Cogswell

Third in our popular "Larry Glenning" series

The Mail Pouch

Wherein Mr. W. Edmunds Claussen tells of the real Clay Allison.

Dear Mr. Lowndes:

Your recently published "Mail Pouch" seems to offer interesting opportunities for those who love Western lore—not merely when a mistake is made by one of the magazines you edit, but when a faulty impression is created by Western fiction, generally, of our heroes.

I am not old enough to have known Clay Allison (of Cimarron, Las Animas, and old Dodge City, etc.,) personally. Yet, somehow, I cringe when I read of him as a thoroughly bloodthirsty killer, a rustler, a diamondback rattler. True, he lived by a rugged code; occasionally he rode into the Clifton House, or into Cimarron, and shot up the place. Sometimes, stark naked he rode his pony at breakneck speed, emptying his revolvers and chasing women and innocents indoors in shocked terror; sometimes he threw the type-cases and printing equipment of a too, too frankly-printed newspaper into the Cimarron river. He is said to have killed as many as eighteen men. (Charlie Siringo says his friends try to hold it to an even dozen.) But most just writers claim these men needed the killing. And—this is important—the courts of his time exonerated him for his killings.

There are those who will say that jurymen were afraid to bring in a verdict against Allison, and that, for this reason alone, he was never hanged. If this mockery of justice actually existed, then blame the jurymen; don't blame Allison!

A feature article in one of our important national magazines several years back set out to paint Clay Allison as the most blood-thirsty mortal that I ever recall having read about. It may all have been true—I wasn't alive in those days, but this I know:

There was living at that time near Allison's "home ranch" a grand old lady of the West—a lady of some ninety years of whom I was very fond; it is pretty generally accepted locally that she had been a girlhood sweetheart of Clay's.

A neighbor brought her the newly-published story, sitting by her side and reading every bitter word. When it was over the old lady dried her tears from her cheeks. She whispered, very softly, "Clay wasn't like that at all!"

I have heard her say those words, too.

I shall recall to my dying day sitting in her living room and giving her husband a veritable third degree. He finally admitted to having once ridden as Clay's foreman. "Why did you quit?" I asked. He looked at me a long moment with his range-sharpened eyes. "Well, Clay got pretty rough—too rough for me."

"Rustled stock?" I asked.

"No," he said, "Clay was no rustler. And the men he shot needed the

shootin'; he was just rough—he drank a lot."

"Now, Pa," said his wife in her soft way, "you won't help him by saying anything now."

Ma knew! The deck was stacked against them—too many fiction writers had painted their pictures, too many people had made up their minds. Yet she still carried her own memories after a lifetime on the plains—and her memories weren't at all like the books!

These following excerpts I think we may believe.

CHARLIE Siringo, who knew Clay, has written of him: *"His warm handshake lingers with me to this day, forty-five years later. This was not the last drink taken* (they met in a saloon, of course!) *with this noted man-killer, who was a fine-looking fellow of middle age when I first met him. His hair, mustache, and short chin beard were black. He stood six feet two inches in his stocking feet, and weighed about 175 pounds. He very seldom laughed, but wore a pleasant smile on his good-looking face when not on the warpath. ...His limp was noticeable, and he often used his Winchester for a crutch."*

At one time the great Texan, J. Frank Dobie, wrote this of Clay: *"He was quixotic in standing up for his rights, and he was quixotically independent in interpreting what constituted his rights. The more whiskey he drank, the more rights he possessed; and sometimes when he came to town he brought a great deal of whiskey. He was generous with it, however, even insisting on his horse enjoying a fair portion."*

In Cimarron a bit of hand-written script was presented to me, which came from the pen of Henri Lambert, the Frenchman who once had cooked for Abraham Lincoln, and in whose veins flowed the blood of a true pioneer. He came to Cimarron to build his famed St. James Hotel. I cannot swear Lambert wrote these words, for I was not alive in those days. But if we can accept anything for truth in our life, we must believe this picture which has been presented by one of Clay Allison's contemporaries:

"He was a prosperous rancher and a natural-born athlete who could bulldog the strongest steer or ride a wild cat. He was absolutely fearless of anything except a red-headed woman. Next to little children and good women, Clay loved music and dancing. After that his love for liquor and a good fight."

I do not mean to make a saint of Clay Allison, he was a man who lived by the gun and for it. He was the product of a rough, raw frontier.

But I wonder if we fiction writers haven't been unfair to some of the famous characters out of the past? What do their daughters think of our writings? Clay Allison had grandchildren attending a Rocky Mountain schoolhouse at the time much of the offensive literature was published. I cannot help wondering how they liked it.

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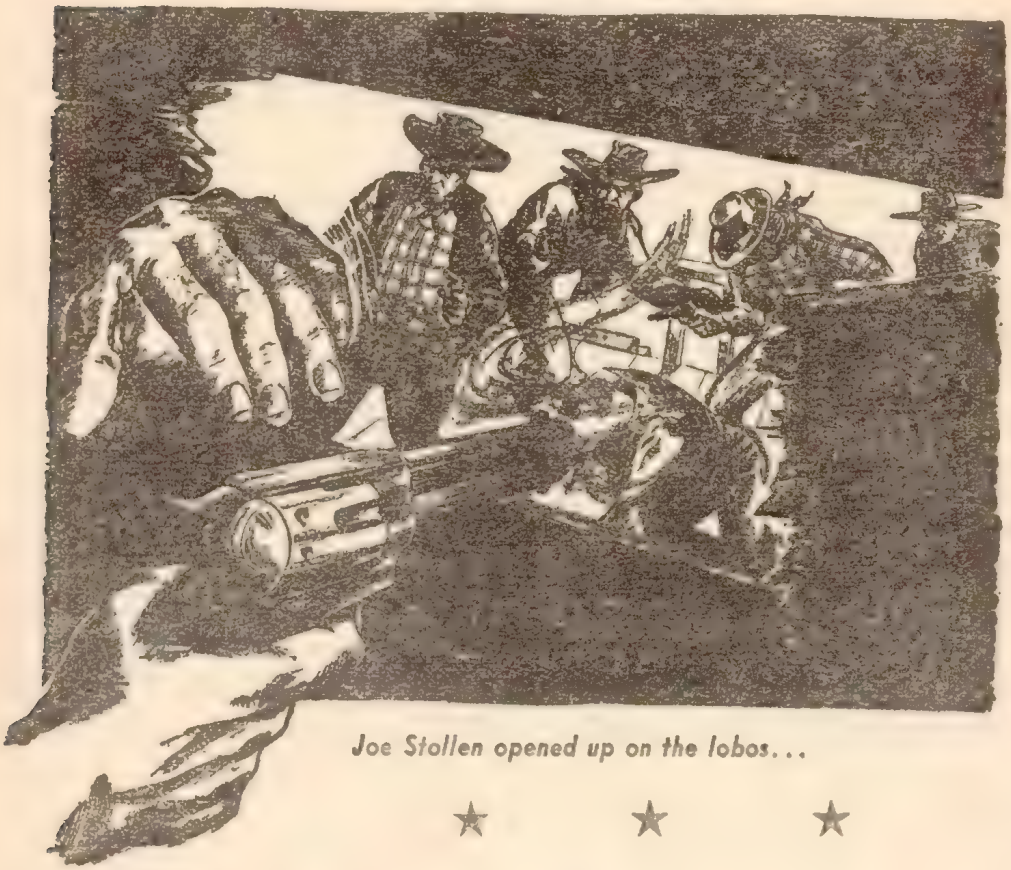
(Mr. Claussen has a fine suggestion here—that we retain this department in REAL WESTERN STORIES as a vehicle for any reader or author who would like to talk about the real West, as distinct from the pictures of it we have seen in fiction.

So, gents and ladies, the welcome mat is out to all of you who care to write to us; don't hesitate to censure us as severely as you wish when you find what looks like an historical error in our pages; and if you just want to talk about the real west in general, we're happy to hear from you on this, too. We'll publish as many letters from you as space permits.

RWL)

DEAD MAN'S MISSION

Novelet by Wallace McKinley



Joe Stollen opened up on the lobos...

★ ★ ★

WHEN A gun speaks, there is no way of recalling its words, the deadly leaden missiles it tongues from its mouth. But Zeke Malone was not thinking of anything like that as he waited in the boulder-strewn, thicket-rank hollow where two trail-forks joined to form the rough road to the south. He was actually Ezekiel W. Malone, a plain-faced man who was almost as broad as he was short, special agent for the Ranchers Protective Association. And right now, Zeke was wondering if his tip had been false, if Splinter ever was going to come down

He'd killed the wrong man, and there was no way of bringing Chuck Atson back to life. Except—yes, there was ONE way; Zeke Malone could step into the dead man's shoes, and carry out Atson's uncompleted mission. Only—it was a mission designed to put an end to one Zeke Malone!

the right fork from Calcedo.

He was wondering, too, if the gaunt Johnson with the toothpick-thin limbs, would make a fight of it. Malone hoped not. Not that he was afraid of smoking it out with Johnson or any other man for that matter; he never thought about fear. "Bad for the digestion," he used to tell his colleagues as he tore into another two-pound steak. But Zeke didn't want to have to kill Splinter, Johnson wanted to talk to him, first at least. There were things he wanted to ask Mr. Johnson, things about men who were disappearing in this piece of country all the way down to the Rio. It was a big chunk of country, too.

Zeke had been holed up here all night—sleepless and chilled to the bone—worrying about how maybe the slippery Johnson had learned he was nigh. The tip had been that Splinter was hiding out somewhere up in Calcedo, but that he was due to slip out sometime during the night and head for the Rio to hop the Line. Malone would have gone into Calcedo for Johnson, but it was a big roaring helltown filled with riffraff and gun jackals who might pass the word to Splinter. Then there would be the long, long tracking down to do over again. Even if Zeke did succeed in ferreting out Johnson, the odds would be against getting out alive.

And Malone wanted to talk to Johnson, very much. Dead, it would be very difficult to make Splinter hear him.

There was a faint noise up the slope where the right fork twisted out of the hollow. Zeke whipped the tailor-made cigaret from his flat-lipped mouth and pinched it out, his round placid face as unperturbed as usual. He waited, hands on his hips over where his guns hung, low-slung, black coat pushed back. Daybreak had come more than an hour ago. But there was no sun; the thick ground-mist boiled and churned slowly, wiping a man's face like clammy fingers. And thunder, like a fat man belching, rumbled intermittently up in the north; there was a long roll of it then, and it was hard to tell whether a rider was coming down the trail.

A bird started up out of a bush midway up the hollow's slope. "*'Won't you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly,'*" Malone quoted softly. He faded back with a peculiar grace for so stocky a man, slipping behind the Spanish bayonet stalks where the tiny creek seeped down into the swamp behind. He put a hand up and over the nostrils of his sad-looking little hammerhead cayuse.

Moments dragged by; then a rider appeared a third of the way down the right fork, where it angled out bare about a rock outcropping. Zeke tongued his lips, his only sign of excitement. The mists had thinned momentarily and he had a look at the oncoming rider. To Malone, it was a beautiful look; there was the curling-brimmed, gray sombrero, the fancy yellow neckerchief caught at the throat by a silver ring, and the pinto pony. All trademarks of Splinter Johnson. The yellow slicker he wore hid his body.

In the hazy air, Malone couldn't distinguish much about the oncoming rider's face, but he felt he didn't need to. This was Splinter as predicted.

A few more seconds and there was the rattle of shale down the path. Zeke already had his left gun out; he hated to move hurriedly unless forced to. The rider appeared past a clump of soapweed, spat out the stub of a quirly, then turned his pony southward.

SOMETHING—Malone never knew what—gave him the alarm. The next instant, ducking low, the rider was throwing spur steel to the pinto, bolting like mad as he hauled at a holster.

"Stop, Johnson! I got the drop on you," Zeke cried out. He waited one

second, another. Then he triggered. The man in the saddle wrenched as the bullet got him in the side, losing a stirrup. But the rider swung his now-drawn gun rearward and spat lead with it blindly, twice. One shot was lucky and ricocheted off a rock to nail Malone over the side of the head, gashing him. But Zeke ignored it as he leaped out and fired again. He aimed for the pony that time and got it in a rear leg. The animal wobbled and then slid to a halt, going down as the leg cracked under it.

"Give up, Johnson! You don't have to die!" Malone roared as he ran across the hollow.

But the rider, leaping clear, turned and sent a bullet perilously close to Malone's right leg. Imperturbably, Zeke strode into the fire. He just stalked along; his second gun came up and he hosed lead. The unhorsed man in the slicker turned and tried to run toward the underbrush beside the road, then went down.

"Surrender, please," Zeke called in his curiously toneless, impassionate voice.

"I'm dying," the man on the ground moaned; he pushed out an arm and let his smoking hogleg slip from his fingers.

Malone said, "I hope not, Splinter," as he walked up to him.

And then the man on the ground had twisted and whipped up a gun with the arm under his body, a gun pulled from a shoulder rig. It licked out a jagged bolt of flame. But the casual Malone had been a whit faster. One of his weapons on a limp wrist had simply flowed up and it dispatched a slug through the prone man's chest, up high on the left side. The man on the ground slumped, never knowing what hit him.

Zeke Malone pulled out his pack of tailor-made cigarets and fired up one. The last bullet from the other man's gun had done everything but shave him as it whined past his cheek. Pulling out a bandana, he shoved his black lopsided shapeless Stetson back on his shoulders by its chin cords and wiped at the cut in his scalp. He went over to the whinnying pinto; there was another shot in the hollow and the animal was out of its misery. The idea of any creature in pain hurt Zeke.

"Reckon Splinter ain't talking—this trip," he said half aloud. Then he saw the prone man's outstretched arm twitch twice.

Zeke was over there in a flash, hauling out a pint of redeye as he knelt beside the other. He turned the man gently, lifted his head and shoulders as ground-mist eddied lazily and thickly about them. The man gurgled some; then Malone was bending closer, peering.

The body had felt thicker than Splinter Johnson's should be. And now Zeke saw that the ring clasping the neckerchief at the other's throat was of plain steel instead of silver. The wounded man opened his eyes. They were black... Splinter Johnson's were a bleak blue.

And that thin knife scar running down one cheek—Splinter had nothing save pock-marks on his longer bonier face.

Malone realized he had shot the wrong man. And this young hombre was dying...

FOR ONE time in his life, Malone's nerve almost cracked. He paled till his lips stood out as twisting blue lines, sweat dewing the upper one. Sheer writhing horror was in his eyes. The hairpin gestured feebly toward the whiskey again and Zeke worked more between his lips.

"Home," the dying man whispered hoarsely. "J-just up over the hill—and—and first trail to right. Get me—" His throat choked up.

Somehow Malone managed to drag himself and the hairpin into the saddle from the perch of a boulder. Then, holding the other in his arms, he started the hammerhead cayuse up the right fork the other had come down to his death. They got on the level, moving through scrubby barren

country. The trail to the right, grass-grown cart tracks. And a mile up it, rounding a wooded bend, Zeke came upon the place.

It had once been a two-bit rancho, but the owner had given up the ghost long since. The roof of the small bunkhouse had caved in. A saddle-backed barn off to the other side was open to the elements of one corner. The yard fence had collapsed in spots and was almost obliterated by the weed-grown yard itself. The main house was a small four-room affair, paintless, the veranda sagging drunkenly at one end; a bedraggled old hen perched on the steps. Off to the side ran a scrubby vegetable garden. Malone drove the overburdened cayuse up to the place as fast as he could and called out.

Nothing happened. He bawled again. When there was still no reply, Zeke yanked out a gun and fired into the air. The door, with one shattered pane packed with rags, was pulled open slowly. A wizened little man about fifty stood in it in a nightshirt, knuckling at sleepy eyes. Then he recognized the burden Zeke bore.

"Oh, my gawd! Chuck! Chuck! Is he—"

"Hurt bad," said Malone as he passed the limp figure down. Together they got Chuck into the front room of the house and stretched out on a sofa with the springs bulging through the upholstery. The old man called to another above who hobbled down the steps shortly, using a cane to support a twisted leg.

Zeke worked some more of his whiskey between the wounded man's lips. The latter's dark eyes opened and twisted to the two little old men in the room. "So long—Unk—Pop... I got unlucky, I guess. I—" He probed at something under his shirt. Then stark terror blossomed in his glazing eyes. "Dick—Dick," he croaked, sitting half up.

"Easy, easy," Malone said with surprising gentleness, letting him back. That was the end. A red froth bubbled to Chuck's lips, and he was gone, looking strangely peaceful.

The lame man folded the hand he had been holding over the dead one's chest. The other old man pulled a bandanna from the shelf of the fireplace and began to snort into it violently, hiking at the pants he had hurriedly donned over his nightgown.

"You—you know who did it?" the lame one asked, faded eyes bleak. He trembled.

Zeke nodded as he flipped back his coat and turned up the underside of his lapel to expose his badge. "Special Agent Ezekiel W. Malone," he said. "I mistook Chuck for a gent I was hunting. When I ordered him to halt, he tried to ride for it and shot back at me. I'm terribly sorry but—"

The lame one drew himself up, the fire of a bygone day returning to his eyes. There was a wailing keen from the other and he flung himself toward where the old Sharps rifle stood in the corner beside the fireplace. Malone pushed back his black coat and put his hands on the butts of his low-slung Colts. The storm broke.

"You—y-you dirty coyote of a murderer—you—you killed my boy, the only thing I had left in this world. If I could only—" He beat palsied hands against his temples.

The uncle shouted hoarse threats and imprecations at Zeke. If he were as young as he once was, he'd break Malone's neck. He'd put the sheriff after him. He had friends higher up in the state. They'd break Malone and strip him of his badge. "You skulking killers hiding behind lawmen's badges and—"

Zeke stood and took it in silence. Something inside him twisted and writhed and he hated his own flesh. He had never slain an innocent man before; it was something that would haunt him for a long time to come. In a paroxysm of rage the wizened uncle grabbed up a meat knife from the greasy table in the dingy room.

"Put that down, Mort!" the father

commanded quietly. His tears had stopped. "Put it—"

"I'll make him pay for Chuck, the back-shooting—"

"Put it down. Bring out the redeye and give us a drink. I'm his father. But there's no sense in going locoed; Chuck was going to get it that way—some day or another. After all, he was a lobo; he cut out of here three years back because he killed a man himself."

The uncle hurled a few more epithets at Malone, then put down the knife wearily and brought out the whiskey bottle. "Yep, I guess you're right. But Chuck was always a good boy to us."

"I know." The father's shoulders shook once or twice more. "But he was riding outside the law. If he had stopped when this man warned him to—well, he asked for it." He picked up a cup of the redeye and passed it to the special agent.

"Life's funny," said Uncle Mort after they all drank. "You helped save Chuck once, Malone. Seems like, as he told us, he got wounded in a gun ruckus over Fairmont way a coupla years ago. You picked him up on the trail and took him into your home and had a doc patch him up."

Zeke looked down at the dead man's face just before his father put a blanket over him. Yes, he recalled it now, remembering the features vaguely. He recollected the time well, because he seldom had anybody into the home his spinster sister kept for him. Zeke had few friends, anyway; riding the trails constantly—and in his business, a man became something of a lone wolf. It seemed better that way.

"I guess there's nothing—but if there is anything—anything at all—I could do..."

The father's eyes brightened as his mind groped its way back from the shock. Then they fell sadly. "No, thanks; reckon there ain't nothing much. Life's sorta peculiar that way. This time Chuck was on honest business for once; it was about his brother, Burt." The old man's face twisted.

"Maybe I could handle the business for him," Malone said.

"Don't know. Don't know. It's all sorta strange. I—"

"Somebody's got to go," Mort put in. "Somebody's got to or we won't see Burt again. That's what Chuck said; that's why he was determined to git the thing through come hell or high water!"

"What thing?" the law officer asked.

For answer, the father went over and lifted the blanket, opened Chuck's shirt and brought out a flattened letter-pouch with a lock on the top. "This is it—the thing. I don't know what is in it—or where the key is." Touching of his son's body was too much for him and he slumped down in a chair before the rude table. "If I lose Burt now, too—"

Mort took over for him. Chuck had told them little. He had come in late last night, dirty and bogged down, limping on a wounded leg. He wouldn't say much—just that Burt was being held prisoner somewhere. Burt had disappeared a couple of weeks ago and the father and the uncle had figured he'd taken to the owlhoot as had his older brother.

"Chuck wouldn't tell us much else. Just set there eatin', nervous as a hawk and a-grabbing for his gun at every little sound. I picked up that pouch there, once, and I thought he'd break my hand the way he grabbed it. He did let on, though, that if folks knew what was in the little bag, he'd be shot dead on the spot."

CHUCK'S father took another drink of whiskey and added to what little they knew. Chuck had allowed as how Burt was being held somewhere; a man called Splinter had looked Chuck up and told him there was something he had to go and get before his brother would be freed. What was in this pouch was apparently what Chuck had had to get, the

thing for which his brother's life was forfeit.

"Splinter," Zeke murmured softly. "Splinter Johnson."

That was about all. Chuck had been taking the precious pouch on toward its destination when he was shot down in mistaken identity.

"Where did he have to take it?" Malone asked.

They only knew that because the late Chuck had talked in his sleep as he caught a few short hours' of shut-eye before hitting the trail again. It sounded a little locoed. He was to go to the General Store in Santos, buy a can of coal oil and say he wanted to see the warden about a pardon.

" '*. . . can of coal oil . . . see warden about a pardon.*' " Malone repeated under his breath. Then he put out his hand. "Can I have the pouch?"

Both men leaned toward him. The father said, "Chuck said carrying this would mean his death if he was caught with it on him."

"Gawd only knows what's at the end of the trail," the uncle added.

Zeke Malone picked up the pouch. "I killed your son. The least I can do is to try to fill his bobts. . ."

2

SANTOS was a considerable ride to the southwest, a sleepy little town down where Teton valley splayed into barren lands. It had been settled back in the early days, when one of the cattle-drive trails ran up that way. But since the railroad had gone through to the east of it, with loading points below, Santos had been slowly shrivelling up and dying. Half of it was a ghost town, homes and stores boarded up and abandoned by men who had pushed on elsewhere to seek a livelihood.

Dusk was just coming like a dark, creeping thing across the sage and buffalo grass of the barrens when Zeke Malone pulled up in a slight hollow to the east of it. For a moment he had a creepy sensation about being in a dead man's boots. All day he had been wondering how much more Chuck Atson—the hairpin he had mistakenly shot—knew than he had told his dad and uncle. And why Chuck had played possum and tried so desperately to kill Malone when Zeke had walked up on him wounded. The poor devil hadn't had a one-in-ten shot of making good on that play; he must have known it. Yet he had preferred to die, rather than be taken with the pouch on him.

Malone put his hand against his shirt as he stood in the gathering dimness; he could feel the flat pouch tucked beneath the money-belt next to his skin. He could have taken his Bowie knife and slashed it open; as a law-enforcement officer, he had a right to. Somehow, that Splinter Johnson was involved in this case.

But Zeke wasn't an agent of the Law now. He was just a man who had killed by excusable mistake and was trying to pay for the life he had taken by rescuing the dead man's brother. What was in the pouch, and whom it belonged to was Chuck Atson's business, none of Zeke's.

Malone cupped a match to one of his tailor-made cigarets and buttoned his black coat against the chill wind rising off the badlands southward. The quiet, neat black coat was typical of the whole man. His pants were black, dust-powdered, and shiny with wear, too. The black slouch hat he had a habit of clamping on whatever way he gripped it was a shapeless thing. He wore a plain white shirt with a little string of black bow tie sagging at the neck. Unostentatious. Quiet. Nondescript, with the round face dotted by the buttons of eyes that told nothing.

●

He worked in the same manner. Few men—especially outlaws—knew him by sight. He had a way of being able to walk into a barroom, dump down a couple of quick ones, and drift out. When he left he had

a photographic, dead-accurate impression of the place; and few if any had noticed either his coming or going. Even along the grapevine of the lobo tribe, Zeke had no reputation as a gunslinger. The only thing the grapevine said was that once Malone took your trail, you had three choices: give up, clear out, or kill him.

He had his own peculiar methods. When the association put him on a man, he went and swore out a warrant against him on any kind of charge—minor, if necessary. Then he started to build his case. All up and down two states, Malone had men working for him. Not officially, not hombres wearing badges. But bartenders; livery stable men; a stage-driving mule-skinner here; a quiet bespectacled bank clerk there. Sometimes it was out of gratitude for past favors. Others for a few dollars, or a quiet hint to stay within the law.

If evidence were needed, Malone would gather it and fit it together piece by piece. Then he started to pick up the trail of his man, learning his haunts; his every little habit; who he rode with. And then, finally Zeke would close in and make the capture. But he would do it in the surest simplest way he could figure, bringing in the man alive, if possible, getting off the scene as fast as he could once he had done the job. More than once when he had hung the deadwood on the victim and could put his finger on him, Zeke would turn it over to fellow agents to go in and pick up the wanted hombre.

When Malone closed a case, they said, he could tell you which side of his mouth the fugitive spat out of.

But this new thing, that seemed to have spread like a cancer out of Calcedo and then bloomed southward, fanning out steadily, had Malone stumped. Men were vanishing, simply disappearing into thin air. There were no reports of shootings attached to the cases; no bodies were found. A man just wasn't any more—at least as far as friends or relatives knew.

Reports began to drift into the main office. Joe Stollen of the Looping-Y hadn't been seen in some weeks. Or that banker over in Forson Junction hadn't been seen since walking downtown to see a mortgage defaulter one evening. Or Swede Manson, who ran the gambling hall up at Calcedo, had apparently left town without giving anybody word, for no reason, leaving his dinero behind him. The circumstances attached seldom made sense.

A kind of cold terror had begun to creep over the country. It was like being wiped out silently in the dark and without knowing why. Nobody knew who would be next, or when. It was as if some kind of an invisible, vengeful wraith hung over the land.

The association had been called in on the case, and Zeke Malone assigned to it. The only help local law-enforcement agencies could give him was to point a finger at Splinter Johnson. Splinter had been noticed on the scene several times just before some man would vanish. He had already been arrested twice and questioned; each time he had had a ready and impervious alibi. There were witnesses—honest businessmen—and once a John Law himself, who had seen Splinter elsewhere when the crime had been committed.

Malone had moved up and down the country, talking in his quiet way with friends and relatives of the missing men. He had come across one clue; in many cases, ransom notes had been received. The dinero had been paid over. The result was nothing but a message to those who had paid: their friend or relative was alive. In some cases, there had been second demands for ransom. And always there would be something—a signature, some trinket the missing man was known to carry, a fact that only he could have known...

MALONE thought he had a break in the case when he got to the scene right after a ransom demand had been made on the brother of the missing David Couch, owner of the big General Store at Gunshot. A trap had been set and the ransom dinero dropped off along the trail by a galloping rider as ordered. The trap had been useless because nobody appeared to pick up the dinero; three days later, Couch's body had been found dumped outside the town, horribly mutilated.

And that had killed Zeke's chance of working from this angle; in fact, he had been threatened by an irate mob. And when a small-time storekeeper had been returned alive, immediately following the payment of two hundred dollars, Malone was whipped. All the storeman could tell was that he had been taken blindfolded into the hills and held two days. And nobody else would talk to Malone. Better to pay, and hope to get the missing man back, than have happen what happened to Couch, they said.

So he had turned to the trail of Splinter Johnson who had dropped out of sight. He had considered Johnson's equally-thin brother, Ban, with the possibility they were doubling for each other. But he had dropped that angle, inasmuch as Ban Johnson had been injured in an attempted escape from State's Prison some years ago. Ban was now paralyzed from the hips down. Zeke had finally traced Splinter to the backwash section of Calcedo and learned of his next move in advance. Waiting for him, he had had the fatal run-in with Chuck Atson.

Now, Zeke realized, this very mission he was on, filling Chuck's boots, might give him the key to the other case. After all, Splinter was hooked up with this Chuck Atson affair, somehow. Malone rode past the first hollow shells of buildings of the half ghost-town of Santos...

Some hoeman with a wagon-load of supplies was just pulling away in the sandy road from the General Store when Malone went up the steps. Otherwise, the street seemed deserted and silent save for the faint brassy clatter of a piano in the saloon up at the corner. He walked into the store with its aroma of flour and pork and manila hemp. The proprietor was a wisp of a man with a dry hacking cough that forced him to keep readjusting his glasses. A lank man in Levis stepped in from the loading platform of the storeroom behind. The proprietor jerked around as if he hadn't known he was there.

"Howdy, Pop," the lank gent said. "Just dropped in for some more crackers." He tossed a coin on the counter, pulled a handful of crackers out of the barrel, and dropped down on a box by the cold, pot-bellied stove in the center of the place.

"Can of coal oil, mister," Zeke said. The storekeeper went down to the back, filled up a can from his barrel, and come back stoppering the spout with a potato. The lank hombre's crunching of his crackers seemed to fill the place.

"And I want to see the warden about a pardon," Malone added.

The storekeeper went blank-faced. Then he nodded hastily. "Oh, yes. A bag of beans. All right, and—"

"No. I want to see the warden—" Zeke broke off. He realized the cracker-crunching had halted abruptly, and that the storekeeper, a frantic look in his eyes now, had been trying to cover up for him. Malone spun and it was too late, though he didn't know it at first.

RISEN, THE lank gent, had his hat off and was waving it slowly at somebody unseen across the road. Malone flipped back his black coat and grabbed for one of his gunbutts. The other leaped around behind the pot-bellied stove, out of sight, and a Colt blasted from the entrance to the storeroom in the rear.

The bullet gashed splinters from the counter inches from Malone's side. He dropped to his knees instinctively, head flopping as if hit. It saved him; the man in the store-room rushed forward without firing again, figuring a hit.

"Look out, Tip!" the lank one behind the stove yelped. But Zeke punctuated his warning as he drew from the holster on the far side and snap-shot across in front of his own bent body. Tip stumbled as a hit leg buckled under him.

But he was a savage bitter-end type of a gun-passer; he grabbed at a post and flung his smoking weapon horizontal again. Malone was forced to throw himself to the left as the lank hombre edged a weapon around the stove and triggered. But the imperturbable Malone twisted into firing position. His and Tip's bullets crossed in mid flight. Then Zeke darted a glance at the red welling from a skin scratch on his right wrist and Tip slid down the post in an awkward heap.

At the same instant, two more men came slamming in the front door, shattering a pane, they kicked it open so hard. One of them ducked behind a flour-barrel as a hogleg roared above Malone's head. It was the wispy storekeeper, with a big blue-black .45 in his pale blue-veined hand. He triggered again and flour spurted from a hole in the side of the barrel.

"Him—in the black rig! That's him!" the lank hombre bawled through the uproar and acrid gun-smoke. "He's got it and—"

Zeke wheeled but onto the floor, risking a shot from the lanky cuss, and threw down on the second man, who had entered by the front door. Two shots drove the gent diving behind the counter at that end. Malone himself dived across the store in the other direction to scramble behind a packing case. The lank one's slug gouged the counter where Zeke had crouched.

The place seemed to be seething with lead; gun-reports blasted deafeningly in the confines of the walls. Broken cartons and punctured cans spilled their contents from the shelves. The storekeeper himself reeled back, with blood spurting from a splinter gash in his forehead. Malone rose suddenly and threw down on the man behind the flour barrel. He was rewarded with a screech of pain as he seared the man's forearm with a bullet that travelled up the length of it.

A slug from the lank hombre drilled the crown of Zeke's shapeless Stetson; the latter was forced to duck again. It was the three of them against him, alone, for the moment. Then the sawed-off, pot-bellied breed glided into sight in the doorway of the storeroom, a knife bared for throwing. With a hoarse cry, the lanky gent ran out around the stove.

It was the cool Malone's chance. He straightened, kicked over his crate barricade, and lunged to drop the lank gent with a thudding gun-blow across the skull.

One of the pair up front cried out, "They're coming! Down the road—now." And the next moment he and his crony had whipped out the door to dive into the night.

Zeke Malone still didn't understand it when the storekeeper ran around from behind the counter, slapping at his cut forehead with an empty flour sack. "Quick! Quick!" he panted breathlessly. "Tom, take care of him. He's one of them. Take care of him."

The fat breed hopped forward and took Malone's arm. "Follow me," he muttered.

Zeke had his cue. Those words of the grocer's, *"He's one of them."* Allowing himself to be led, the law-agent was hustled back into the storeroom to the foot of a ladder.

"Up there—and stay quiet. You no come down no matter what the hell happen. Very quite, please."

MALONE went up the ladder to find himself in a low dusty loft. He paused a moment to refill

his smokepoles, then crept forward toward the tiny grimed window that caught the last gray light. A thin column of yellow lamplight speared up at him; it came through a knothole from the store below. Malone was on hands and knees, head pressed close to it, when half a dozen men strode in the front door. The leader wore a five-pointed sheriff's star. Zeke recognized him as Edson from Calcedo County. Edson was the breed who paid no attention to jurisdiction or boundary lines when he was on a man-hunt.

"What the hell's going on here, Perley?" Edson snorted at the storekeeper.

The storekeeper was his former meek, ineffectual-looking self. "A gunfight," he said quaveringly. He pointed to the lank one who was just sitting up and to the dead Tip further back. "They got in an argument and drew on each other. I begged them to stop but—"

Edson yanked the lank hombre to his feet. Somebody brought a dipper of water and the sheriff threw it in the lank gent's face. "Howdy, Jim Marks. Thought I knew you. What's your story?"

Overhead, watching through his peephole, Malone tongued his lips. He knew who Marks was—a two-bit lobo-boss, cold-blooded as a snake when he had the drop on a man. Then he was amazed to hear Marks lie even more outrageously than the storeman.

"He's a liar," Marks said, rubbing his head as he pointed to Perley. "That fella back there is Tip, my saddle-pard. We was just buying some stuff when this hairpin—fella named Texas Jack—comes in. He'd owed me a chunk of dinero for a long time. I asked him for it and he got tough. We had a fight and when he got tough, his hogleg, well—" He finished with a shrug.

Edson glared around. "Where's this Texas Jack then?"

"He musta slipped out the back," Marks said, knowing his men had had the front covered. "I can prove I'm right; you'll find his pony out there at the hitchrail."

Up above, Malone caught his breath. That looked like the hitch. They would find his hammerhead cayuse out there and then search the place for him. And Zeke Malone was in the peculiar spot of not wanting the Law to find him right then; he had to carry out this mission for Chuck Atson.

But one of the sheriff's men came back in a moment later. "He's crazy, boss. 'S no horse out there. And nobody's rid off since we came up."

Edson glared around. "I'm out after bigger stuff than two-bit packrats like you, Marks, or I'd drag you in." He levelled a warning finger at the meek-seeming Perley. "I told you. I'd be watching you. That Swede Manson who disappeared weeks ago—he was seen here at your store three days ago—and then he just vanished into thin air again."

"I don't know, sheriff," Perley whined. "I never knew him and—"

Edson seized Marks by his collar and started him toward the door. "I'm warning you again, Perley; I'm hanging 'round here close."

Up above, after they had gone out, Malone leaned back on his heels as he tied up his cut wrist, using a piece of his white shirttail. He was thinking of that cry of Marks when his two men had come in the front. *"He's got it,"* Marks had yelled, meaning him, Malone.

The law-agent could put two and two together easily enough. It meant that Marks had known what Zeke carried, the pouch, once Marks had heard Malone say he wanted to see the warden about a pardon. Somehow, the two-bit lobo had picked up information on what Chuck Atson had been carrying.

Zeke fired up one of his cigarets, thinking how both parties below had lied. Perley had denied his presence entirely; Marks had lied as well, seeking to pass Malone

off as somebody who owed him dinero. Both, apparently, didn't want the law in on the play; then his pony had been whisked away to cover all tracks. Malone figured the breed to have handled that.

He didn't know the clammy touch of fear; but he did know that it was a deep game he was playing in a dead man's boots.

3

BELOW, they locked up the store after two of Edson's men returned for Tip's body. The lights were doused and Perley went into the room that served as his living quarters. Sometime after he came up with some grub for Malone.

"Just wait till some after midnight," the storekeeper said in the dimness, after cautioning Zeke to show no light up there. "Then Tom'll take you on to where you want to go." He went down again, and the law again realized that Perley had never once asked him for his name.

The hours waned away slowly. Finally both Perley and the breed came up. A ladder was hoisted up and placed to lead to a trap-door to the roof. They went up it and Perley nodded with satisfaction as he saw the gathering clouds masking the moon. He had only one thing to say in parting.

"Don't forget to mention to the warden how ol' Perley handled everything good, will you?"

The next building, long-since vacated, was ten feet away. But there was a plank on the roof that the breed carefully and silently slung over to the adjoining place. They crossed to that roof, did likewise to reach the third building. It, too, was one of the ghost structures of Santos. There was an open stairway that led down the rear of the building to the top story. They went in a glassless window there, through what had been the living quarters of a long-ago dance-hall girl. They got down to the main floor of the big, sprawling place that had once rattled with music and gaiety and now echoed only to the pattering of pack-rats.

Then they were out a rear door that leaned drunkenly in its frame, darting a few yards, and going down a dry gully on hands and knees. Out behind a clump of cottonwoods, their horses waited. And one was Malone's own sad-faced hammerhead, too. They moved but through the brush of the barren country. Tom was non-committal when Zeke tried to learn where they were headed.

"You wanta see warden, huh?" was all he would say.

They half-circled, then went into the southwest at a hand-lope...

Dawn had come, and the sun was tinting the east saffron as they rode down out of the ragged broken country near the Rio toward the edge of a spit desert. A two-story ramshackle structure sat down there with a sign stuck on a post before it. It read: *Al's Last Chance.*

"Here!" the breed grunted. They got down and went in, heat already pouring in devil-dancing waves off the yellow dunes of the desert. A man as big around at the waist as he was high, with greasy black hair and an oily face, waddled in from a room behind the front place that served as a bar and restaurant. He wore a Mex bolero of green silk over a soiled shirt that exposed half his hairy chest. He looked like a man who knows the ending to a joke somebody is telling. "Hello," he said. "What the hell can we do you for?"

The breed walked over to the bar and reached over it and took a bottle. He uncorked it and thumb-wiped the neck. "This gent wants to see the warden about a pardon." Then he held the bottle to his mouth until it was half empty. When he put it down he walked out and remounted without a backward glance.

The fat man didn't say anything

about what he had drunk. Apparently that was the breed's pay for bringing anybody through to see the warden. The fat man just stood staring at Malone as if he could see plumb through his clothes to his skin.

"Is the—the warden here?" Zeke asked.

"The warden—here?" The fat man seemed to think that was one hell of a fine joke. "Hell, no," he said when he stopped his laughing. He pulled out a chair at a table, motioned Malone to seat himself, and brought over a bottle with a glass. Then he disappeared into the back. A little later he brought in some greasy breakfast.

"'Oh won't you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly,'" Zeke hummed as he ate. Only this time he felt like the fly.

MORE time passed, Malone called out for the fat man and got no answer. He stepped out the door on the side of the place overlooking the desert, the glare from the iridescent sand stinging his eyeballs. There was a rude tower some twenty feet high out there; on the little platform at the top stood the fat proprietor, a tarnished telescope glued to an eye. He waved down. "They come soon," he said cheerily.

Malone waited. Then he could see the dots of figures coming across the desert toward the place, swinging into sight when they topped a dune, then vanishing as they dropped into a hollow, like boats at sea. It seemed to take them an unusually long time to draw nearer. But when they did, Zeke saw why. There were three riders and a fourth figure afoot stumbling through sand; that fourth one wore no sombrero.

They finally were almost there. The walking man stumbled and one of the riders reached from his saddle and seized him by the collar and half-ran him along. The latter was a middle-aged little figure, half bald, body shrunken in clothes that seemed sizes too large for him. He fell to the ground when they got in front of the *Last Chance*.

They brought him inside. The fat boss threw a bucket of water in his face, then forced a snort of whiskey down his throat. Nobody paid any heed to Malone. Two of the horsemen were cold-eyed blank-faced hombres, both with tied-down guns. But the third, the leader, was one of the tallest men Zeke had ever seen. He seemed to tower so that his sombrero was in danger of scraping the ceiling. He wasn't large or hefty, but he must have been all of seven feet high, red-faced with shrewd blue eyes. He wore a lawman's badge on his checkered shirt.

The little man who had been walking sat up slightly. Then he began to gibber, the eyes in the pits of his face running around wildly. "I tell you—you mustn't take me back there. You musn't ... No...n-no...no-o... please, I beg you. Th-they want me to—"

"Now there, mister, take it easy," the towering man told him. "Easy. We're the law, you know; you're all right."

"But—no—no. Don't bring me back there." He caught at his throat and for the first time Malone noticed how his boots were broken open and the soles almost gone. He had certainly done one hell of a heap of walking. "Let me—let me have a drink—wat-water—anything." He was half delirious.

The fat man picked up the dipper but the tall one with the law badge pushed his arm back. Under normal circumstances, Malone would have asked him where he was from and what his official position was. But he had this role to play out for Chuck Atson, the man he had killed. He kept silent.

"W-water please... But don't take me back there...n-not there. They're ...they're trying to make me t-tell them the combination t-to the safe at the—the bank...and I—I don't know

it. I—I d-don't... But if they b-beat me again—" He had slid to his knees, clasped hands lifted supplicatingly.

Zeke figured it was that missing banker from Forston Junction. He wanted to tell the badge-wearer that, but he had to carry through Chuck Atson's mission first. He had already guessed that no friend of the "warden's" would be on the side of the Law.

The tall man bent to take the gibbering man under the chin none too gently. "Water," the other pleaded, on the verge of collapse.

The tall man picked up the dipper and held it out of reach of the other's flailing arms. "Now, listen, mister. We're the Law; we ain't a-going to take you back there. No... Now you just tell us the combination to that safe and it'll be all right."

"B-but I don't know," the banker croaked, eyes straining from their sockets. "I don't."

"No water—till you do," said the tall one softly.

The half-dead banker looked at the dipper as if it were heaven itself. "But I don't—" Then he doubled over on the floor.

"Guess he don't," one of the pair with the tall hombre said wearily. "And we had all that ride in the sun."

"Fix him up," the tall one said to the fat proprietor.

WONDERING what the game was, how the Law could operate like that, Malone watched as they gave him water, doused his head again, and then worked some whiskey between his bloodless lips. The trio then went over to the bar as if by a mutely conceived plan and filled their own glasses.

The little banker propped his eyes open and studied them. He seemed to have regained some control of himself. His eyes crept around through the doorway to the three ponies; he wasn't gibbering any more.

Malone held his breath when the little banker's chair creaked. But none of the trio turned. It seemed too good to be true as the little man girded himself for the great effort, flitted to the door on his ragged boots, then fled into the sunshine. He got to the horses, slowly and painfully dragged himself into the saddle of one, turned it up the trail. Getting a rough-lock on it, he drummed its sides with his frantic heels. Nothing happened.

"The reins—the bridle, you fool," Malone whispered under his breath. The pony was ground-anchored, and, being well trained, would not move. Then the banker grabbed up the reins, jerked the animal's head, and it went off at a trot.

One of the pair with the tall man had sauntered doorward. He stood picking his teeth, gazing out. It seemed impossible he didn't see. Even hear. He yawned, then whisked out a short gun, leveled it over a forearm, and triggered. In the dying crash of the shot, there was the thud of a body hitting the trail. And through the grimy side window, Malone saw the little banker pitch from the saddle and hit earth and roll and roll like a broken sack.

"'Tween the shoulder-blades—dead center," said the man in the doorway, holstering his gun lazily.

Zeke Malone came out of his chair with a jerk. He had never seen anything as viciously cold-blooded in his life. A rage ripped through him, made him blind with fury for a moment. All his usual poise was blasted.

Then he realized the tall leader was swinging a bared gun by the trigger-guard over at the bar and facing him. And in the kitchen doorway, the fat Al stood scratching his belly whence he had plucked another gun from his waistband. "You wanted to see the warden, mister?" the tall one was asking...

It exploded on Malone then, even as he still recoiled from the slaughter of the banker and the fact that he had not prevented it. Now, it came

like a blow in the teeth. This trio were only bogus lawmen; they were henchmen of the sinister unseen figure known as "The Warden." As if to confirm it, the towering one unpinned the star from his vest and pocketed it. "I'm Pike," said the one who dwarfed all others in the room, after Zeke had nodded. "Who're you?"

"Atson. Chuck Atson."

Pike's half-sneering attitude immediately changed; evidently Chuck was somebody important to the Warden. The overtall man ordered a drink for Malone. His manner became extremely respectful. It was as if the man he took to be Chuck Atson carried something extremely valuable or knew where it was cached, at least. "Sure glad to make your acquaintance, Chuck," he said, stooping to clap him on the back. "This here is Hap Good and this is Bob South." He introduced the gunman pair with him. "Have much trouble but on the trail?"

Malone was non-committal, still writhing inside at that ruthless killing. "A man's got to expect something."

Pike leaned close to whisper. "You got what you went after?"

Zeke had been waiting for something like that. "Seems like that's a matter between me and the Warden."

"Sure, sure," said Pike. He winked knowingly. "Have another drink... Reckon you wouldn't be back if you hadn't got it..." He returned to Al. "No word from Splinter yet, huh?"

Al shook his fleshy face. "I don't hear nothing." Malone was blank-faced as he lifted his drink and dumped it down quickly. But here was a cue he had been awaiting; it *was* Splinter who had gone to the late Chuck Atson, according to his father and uncle.

Pike said, "Reckon he's dodging that Zeke Malone, trying to get him shed of his trail. A regular danged devil when he starts tracking you down, Malone. But it won't be long before we got his hands tied!" He chuckled. "He'll climb into his hole damn fast when the Warden hangs the deadwood on him. Splinter ought a be pulling in soon, though."

A FEW MINUTES later they started out, just Pike and Zeke Malone. The two gun-slicks remained at the *Last Chance,* apparently as advance guards in case any genuine John Laws did succeed in penetrating that far.

"Burt, your brother, he's doing fine down at the place, Atson," Pike said too off-handedly as they skirted the desert, moving southward. "He's fine—so far; the Warden always keeps his word."

Malone got the hint. It was a veiled warning against any trouble-making play on his part—reminded him his brother's life was at stake. They pushed further south, crossed a spike of the desert, and then threaded their way among the sand-hills and broken country above the Rib. There were absolutely no signs of human habitation. Just the rough thicket-infested hills and little rocky valleys that ran southward. Pike led the way through a little U-shaped pass and they were following the course of a wild stream.

Malone knew now, beyond all doubt, that Splinter Johnson was involved in this thing, whatever it was. But he couldn't figure out those remarks of Pike's in the *Last Chance* about having his, Zeke Malone's, hands tied soon. How the man called the Warden was going to hang the deadwood on him. Malone knew it was more than sheer bluster; Pike's voice had been too confident.

"Hard place to find," Pike said once. Malone nodded. "And a harder place to get out of," Pike added. Zeke thought of the banker who had been killed as they feigned to let him escape. The story was plain there. The poor devil had apparently escaped from this place, and gone stumbling

out across the desert—only to be tracked down, then shot like a crippled horse no longer any good when they were convinced he didn't know the combination of the safe of his bank.

They went around a bend of the turbulent stream. It splayed out suddenly as the bottom of the little valley widened, becoming a placid muddy-bosomed watercourse splitting around a low island running up from mud-flats. Then, through the tangled matted foliage of the apparently uninhabited island, Malone was able to make out stone walls, battlements. The wind bent a tree-top over there and he glimpsed the iron bars of a window. When they had gone down the east bank a few more yards the big rusty, peeling metal gates came into view. Then Zeke knew.

This was Coyote Island. Once part of the State Prison system, it had been a forbidding place of terror—a place of lost, damned souls about which mysterious tales emanated. Only the most vicious, worst offenders were sent there—especially hombres who had a reputation for breaking jails. Coyote Island was supposed to have been escape proof. It had been abandoned by the penal authorities some years ago.

They cut through a small peninsula that jutted out into the stream, Malone pausing to get down and pull something from the fetlock of his cayuse. Then they were at the point where the bridge used to cross the stream. Now there were only a few charred piles near the bank and a single rock-filled crib out near the middle of the fork of water. The State place.

A bridge seemed unnecessary across the placid, shallow stream at that point; it seemed as if an escaping prisoner could almost have waded it easily. But when Pike walked his pony into the water, after sighting up on a point on the island, Malone understood.

"Follow me danged careful," Pike said. "The Warden would blast the daylights outa me if I lost you!"

It, the river bed, was quicksand. The bunch here evidently knew some secret safe path across the bed. Pike veered his pony downstream, eyes locked on the bank of the island. "If your pony starts to go down," he called back, "jump in the water and swim. Don't try to stand up!"

MIDWAY across, he paused and Malone saw him lining up the course with the yellowed trunk of a dead tree. They proceeded, cautiously, until they were practically at the glistening, mucky flats projecting from the island before Pike spurred his pony ahead. He led the way down a faint twisting path to the big gates of the man-hell that had been known as Coyote Island and they opened as the pair neared. They had been watched all the way across the stream.

A couple of wolf forced gun-slicks lolled inside the courtyard of what had been a prison. There was no attempt made to disarm Malone. It wasn't necessary, he realized, as the heavy gates clanged closed behind him. Inside, he was one man against a pack; even if he got out, there was that river-crossing to make—certain and horrible death to anybody who did not know how to cross.

"Can't cross the other fork of the river at all, eh?" he mentioned to Pike casually as they dismounted.

"Three men tried it the last year it was a prison," Pike said dispassionately. "Never even found the bodies so they didn't have the trouble of burying 'em or—"

There was a high gibbering laugh. Zeke Malone was a steel-nerved hombre, but that laugh plucked at the very roots of his nerves. It was not human, the mirthless cackle of some poor, doomed thing long since passed from sanity. Malone's eyes twisted to the wall of the end of the prison section that formed one

side of the courtyard. Then he was swallowing hard and his neck veins threatened to burst against the collar that held his string of black bow tie. For behind the rusted bars of one of the cell windows up at that end of the prison was a face. A man!

It was human no longer, yellowed, cadaverous, lank gray hair hanging over the forehead and hiding the ears. The claws of hands that gripped the bars and pitifully tried to shake them were more like talons. Then his eyes flashed and the blood-chilling cackle rattled out again.

Malone saw there were faces at other barred windows, too, then he realized. This was no mere outlaw hideout, one that was the last place anybody would expect. It was a prison again, but a prison ruled by lobos and with law-abiding men incarcerated in it. They were the men missing up and down the Calcedo country, the ones who had vanished into thin air; they were imprisoned here as hostages, or for ransom.

4

PIKE SAID, "Come along," impatiently. He strode toward the low building down near the wall at the other side of the courtyard, the place that had once served as the official residence of the warden. It was a dobe building.

A shambling figure, clothes in rags, straggled out the door of it before a guard with drawn gun as they neared. The prisoner simply slouched along, head down, the picture of despair. He passed Pike without glancing up, came abreast of Malone. The latter recognized the tall, now half-starved figure as Joe Stollen of the Looping-Y. Stollen's eyes switched up from Malone's boots.

"Zeke! Zeke..." He was one of the few men who knew the law agent for the Ranchers Protective Association.

Malone moved like a steel spring. He struck hard, lashing out with his left, then piling into the bigger Stollen. He bore him to the ground and they threshed around wildly as the guard jumped about and cursed Stollen, unable to get in a shot. Other gunmen came rushing across the courtyard as the poor idiot up in the cell cackled and shrieked with insane delight.

In the uproar and confusion, Malone rolled Joe Stollen under him, then quickly plucked a hideout .38, rigged under his coat, and shoved it down out of sight inside the waistband of Stollen's jeans. "Careful, you fool! I'm here as Chuck Atson, Burt's brother," he whispered hurriedly in his ear. "Don't make a play till you hear the first gunshot!" Then he shoved Stollen's head down against the flags of the courtyard, cursed furiously and disentangled himself.

"Didn't he call you 'Zeke'?" Pike said suspiciously.

Malone gave the prone Stollen a light boot in the side to make it look good, then turned his face with a red-running cheek which he had scratched open himself. "Don't know what the Coyote called me—but he sure ain't got no affection for me."

Stollen on his feet, shoulders bent against the blows of two gunmen, played his part then. "That's him—that's him!" he shrilled as if his senses had left him. "I know the lowdown skunk! That's Zeke Betts, that dirty foreman of mine who double-crossed me. That's him, Betts—with the glass eye! That—"

Pike laughed harshly. "'Nother one gone loco, huh?" The guards dragged off Stollen. "Nice glass eye you ain't got, Chuck! Ha!" He went up on the porch of the house. "Tell the Warden that Chuck Atson got here," he told the gunhand lounging there. The latter went inside.

When he returned, he thumbed for them to enter. Pike and Malone went down a hallway to a room at the rear. Pike went in alone for a few

minutes; then Malone thought he was looking at Splinter Johnson himself. There was the long-jawed, pock-marked face with the mean blue eyes, the rail of body with the arms like strings even in shirt sleeves hanging from it. The man was seated behind a heavy table in the dim room; but when he spoke, his first words told Malone he was Ban Johnson, Splinter's brother, who had been crippled for life, supposedly paralyzed in his attempted escape from State Prison.

"You didn't hear or see nothing of Splinter when you was out on the trail?" Ban asked. One of his bony hands reached out to nervously tap the two canes propped beside the table. There was genuine worry in his reedy voice. "Did you, Atson?"

Malone shook his head. "Nothing since the time he first looked me up. I was pretty busy...My brother's all right?"

"Busy, eh..." Ban Johnson chuckled high, then laughed. Then it became a cough that wracked him and flung him around in his chair. "Where's that damned doc?" he cried, half strangling, color fading as his body weakened in the paroxysm. "That damned—" A little man with a shock of white hair pattered in from another room, bearing a glass of cloudy liquid. He held it to the lips of Ban Johnson, the "Warden" of this prison in reverse. The paroxysm began to pass as the liquid went down. "You should have another operation, Ban," the doctor said. "I have told you that. Let me work on you once more and you will be a whole man. Look what I have done one time—"

Ban shoved him away with an oath. "Get away from me! You and your damned knives! If you'd done a good job the first time, I'd be all right now. Sometimes I think you want to kill me!" He started for the six-gun lying on the table, then grabbed up a cane and whacked at the doctor who retreated hurriedly. Ban looked at Malone again.

"The Marks bunch tried to get me over in Santos," Malone said to make his role convincing. "Perley wanted me to tell you he handled things slick."

"Perley better—with what I got on his son," Johnson said with a knowing smile. "Pike, maybe one of these days it'd be a good idea if that Jim Marks did a little stretch here as our guest. Eh?"

"A good long term," Pike agreed. "And then we free him—like we did that banker!"

"You got it—what you were sent after, Atson?" Ban asked.

MALONE nodded, playing a waiting game. That last remark had told Malone what he already suspected. *None* of the inmates were ever intended to get away from Coyote Island alive; they knew too much, could talk. Malone was glad he had dropped the pouch behind a rotted log on the other shore when he pretended to be getting a burr from his pony's fetlock. It was his ace in the hole. He nodded and cast a glance Pike's way.

Ban Johnson thumbed toward the door and told Pike to wait outside. Then he rose, propping himself on a cane. "I told you to go to that Malone's home, where you had once stayed, and to find out about all his relatives. I know he has a nephew he supports away at school somewheres. There is an old father, too. You found out where they are?"

Zeke got the idea then. Chuck Atson, whom he had killed by mistake, had been used by the Warden, Ban Johnson, to learn about Malone. Knowing Atson had once stayed in

READING for MALES

HOW TO START YOUR OWN MAIL ORDER BUSINESS by Ken Alexander

Reviewed by Jack Parker

Believe me, I feel a healthy respect for mail order, having seen a friend, a former $30-a-week clerk, acquire a Cadillac and a country estate in the business. Questioned about his success, he explained, "Mail order! You just slice open the mail and extract the dollar bills."

But perhaps he is to be taken more literally than his facetious reply implies. I've come to that conclusion since reading "How To Start Your Own Mail Order Business," by Ken Alexander, a book which dissipates the mystery about mail order, explaining everything in a simple, straightforward way.

Beginning with the idea, the author shows what makes a product suitable for mail order, giving many illustrations such as hair colorings, medicines, cosmetics, jellies, novelty jewelry, picture albums, magic kits, etc.

I'd always thought that going into business meant quitting your job, drawing a sizeable sum out of the bank and renting an office. It was a surprise to learn that one could operate a mail order business from home while working elsewhere and all this on very little investment, practically on a shoestring. If in business already one could add a going mail order department for only the cost of printing and stamps.

The book shows how to prepare a mail order ad, where to place it and gives the names of list brokers, and publications used successfully in mail order.

Having just finished the book, the technique of mail order seems so crystal clear that I'm almost tempted to take a crack at it myself!

The book is sold on refund guaranteed basis and persons interested are advised to get it by sending $2.00 directly to the publishers:

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Malone's house, Ban figured Chuck could drop back there and pick up information about the mysterious law agent. He nodded again.

Johnson began to laugh, way down deep with a gloating note of anticipation. "Now—now I've got him! I've got that Malone. He'll walk in here of his own accord and he'll go down on his knees and he'll beg—and—beg!" He cackled, smacking his lips.

Zeke tongued his. *"I'm in your parlor, said the fly to the spider,"* he said to himself, improvising.

Johnson lowered himself into his chair slowly, grim again. "You're sure you got what I want? Oh-h, I'll seize some of those relatives of that Malone's and when I tell him I've got them—" He dropped his voice to a tense whisper. "I told you—through Splinter—to find out where his relatives were—where they lived. You know that now?"

Malone nodded.

"You wrote it all down—in case something happened to you so you could send it through anyway, Atson?" When Zeke gave him another nod, the Warden stretched out a bony hand.

The law agent had one of his tailor-made cigarets in his mouth and languidly applied a match to it. "I'd like to see my brother."

Johnson's face twisted. "On Coyote Island, it is not wise to demand—not from the Warden. Even if you got a gun on me now, you could never get out of here... But—" Then he shouted and Pike came in and Johnson told him to have them bring Burt Atson over from the prison block.

[*Turn To Page* 120]

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A few minutes later, Chuck's brother was shoved through the door by a guard. He was hollow-faced and dull-eyed, having surrendered all hope. It was easy for Malone to run and clutch him, to whisper hurriedly in his ear that he was supposed to be his brother. Burt's arms about Malone's shoulders tightened to show he understood.

"You see—I always keep my word. Now, Chuck—"

"All right," Malone said. "We'll go get the papers I wrote the information on."

"Go get them? Go get them?" the Warden shrilled thinly. "You mean you didn't—"

Malone smiled thinly. "I left them on the other side of the stream—just in case."

The Warden rose, working his lips, eyes flickering. "You *are* a smart one, eh, Chuck... You don't trust anybody, I see."

Zeke shrugged. "I got 'em cached across the river. You and Burt and

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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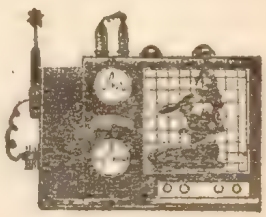

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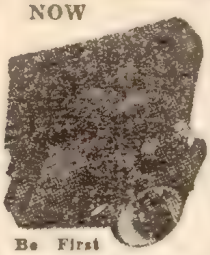

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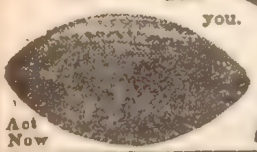

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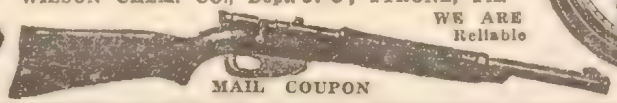

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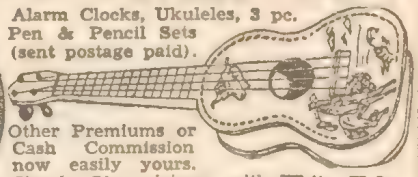

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me—we'll go get them—together."

After a moment, the Warden bowed his head as if accepting that setup. "You want to be sure you get out, eh... All right. All right. We'll all go. Of course, I have to have a couple of men with me. I am unable to ride alone." His eyes swept to Malone's holsters, then to Burt Atson and his waist minus gun-belt. The Warden tittered as he moved out from behind the desk on his canes.

The showdown would come, Zeke realized, when they got across the river and he turned over the pouch. It would be he alone against a couple of gun-slicks and the Warden; he hadn't missed the telltale bulge of a shoulder rig beneath Johnson's black shirt.

"All right—we will go and—" the latter was saying.

Then the door opened and Ban's double, aside from the legs, Splinter Johnson stood there...

THE WARDEN'S eyes glowed warmly at the sight of him and he reached out in an attempt at an affectionate embrace with one of the canes. "Splint! Splint—you got back," he chortled warmly. "I heard that Malone was on your trail and—"

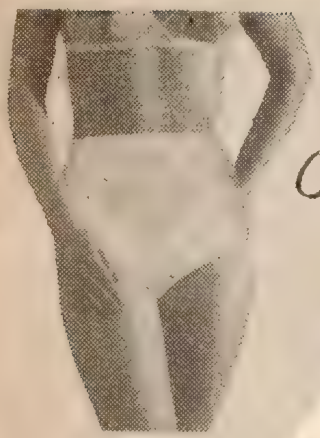
Splinter looked around. "Who's that?" he snapped, pointing a finger at Zeke.

"Why that's Burt's brother—"

"It ain't!" yipped Splinter, going for a holster.

But Malone was quicker; much quicker and foxier. He didn't even stir a finger toward his gun scabbards. That was the expected move and he sensed that the Warden was already drawing. Malone had half bent; now he whipped straight with a Bowie blade drawn from his boot. He was over on Splinter and slashing downward. Howling, the other yanked back a gun hand, a slice welling blood across the back of it; his gunbelt plunked

[*Turn To Page* 124]



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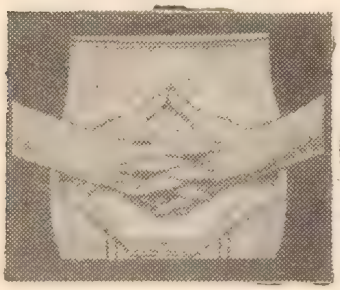

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to the floor, neatly severed by Malone's knife.

The next instant he had that stubby Bowie against Splinter Johnson's chest and he looked back at his brother, the warden. "Put down the hogleg—or it's Splint," Malone said matter-of-factly. He was gambling on the Warden's deep affection for his brother.

It worked. Ban Johnson sucked his breath, then lowered the Colts he had been about to cock. Malone gave an order to Burt Atson. The latter obeyed with alacrity and pleasure, plucking the big six-gun off the desk and banging the Warden over the side of the head with it. The gun-boss of Coyote Island fell into his chair, canes rattling to the floor.

"But how're we going to get—" Burt began.

The fast-thinking law agent already had the answer as he drew a gun himself and ran over the quivering Splinter for a hideout weapon. "Wrap your hand up in your neckerchief," he told him. Then he told Burt to get the gray coat off the Warden's shoulders.

A couple of minutes later, the trio were going out the door, up the hall and out of the house. It was Malone, striding along with his black coat pushed back and a hand hooked around a gun butt. But nobody thought anything of it as they saw the Warden, Ban Jonhson, hobbling along before him on his sticks; at least, they took that one for the warden. Burt Atson walked beside Malone.

"Careful, Splint," Malone whispered to the man in front, passing as the Warden. "One move—one cry—and you'll be pushing up grass on a grave! Tell 'em you're going along."

Splinter, passing as his brother, told Pike and the other gun-man at the steps that. They moved slowly across the courtyard toward the big gates. The two men there started to swing

[*Turn To Page* 126]

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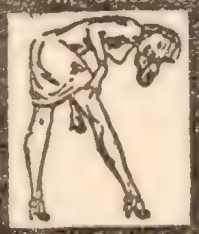

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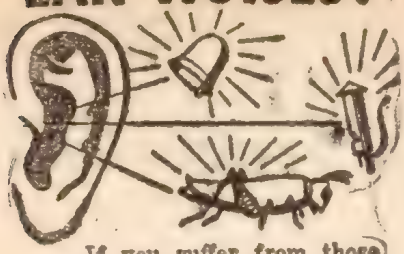

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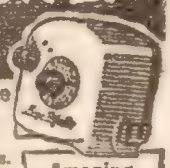

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them open. If they could once get to the river with Splint as hostage—

But Splinter realized he was a goner once he was outside those gates; he seemed to stumble as a cane slipped and went down on one k n e e. The next instant he had leaped sideward, screeching. And he lunged up, dodging on his two good legs The very act in itself told the lounging gun-guards more than any words.

Malone's gun roared, but it only nicked Splinter Johnson in the shoulder. The beans had been spilled. The single shot was like a tocsin; men leaped forward, drawing, yelling.

But before the courtyard erupted into a lead-snarling arena, there was a hollow gun-report inside the walls of the prison building. It was Joe Stollen shooting and shattering the lock of his cell door. There was a second shot inside there, moments later. Stollen had just dropped one of the guards, seizing his keys and his guns.

A slug spanged by Malone's hat out in the courtyard and the report thundered a moment later. He had to whirl to keep from being blasted down from behind. Then he had his second weapon out and the pair snorted their staccato death-chant. Big Pike, over by the house, doubled as if he were trying to touch his head to his toes. He straightened halfway but as he swayed Malone let him have another slug in the body. He didn't have to shout for Burt to run and get the dead Pike's gun; the other man with Pike darted back into the house.

Swinging, Zeke Malone triggered at a man in the doorway of the prison. A slug from somewhere nicked Malone's coat-sleeve; then he and Burt Atson were running toward the gates that had been half opened. Their one hope was to get outside. After that, if they could get across the river by some miracle, they could bring help in. One of the gun-slicks at the gate threw down on them; Burt was struck in the

ribs by a shell from the jail building, stumbled and went to a knee. Darting past him, Malone dropped one of the gate guards.

But he had to reverse himself as a fresh rain of lead spattered from the prison block, all the while the gibbering laughter of the poor insane devil issued from that window. Malone strode toward the prison, triggering with both weapons. He sent a man at a window of the second-floor hall reeling back, blood spurting from a hole in his face. But two other gunhands were working along in the high grass by the wall, seeking to get behind them and cut off their flight.

Burt Atson recovered his feet and slammed away at the prison building, too, but it looked as if the numbers against them were too great. Once they turned their backs and ran for it, they would be scythed down beyond all doubt.

And then that ace Malone had planted at the last moment paid off. A guard firing with a shotgun from the window of an empty cell was suddenly jerked from sight by an arm about his throat, screaming with terror. Stollen, and the men he had had time to free, were striking. There was another screech through the gunfire from the second floor. The guards in the entrance of the building looked over their shoulders. Two vanished inside, then one of the bunch shooting at Malone and Burt was slammed out into the open by a shot that took him in the back. Stollen and his pards were trying to battle down the stairs.

The rest of the gun-slick pack there turned and went in to handle the trouble there. "Burt!" Malone barked. He turned and leaped toward the gates.

But that pair coming along the wall lunged out and triggered at them. Burt was hit again, a searing shot along the side of his scalp. Not dangerous but it made him reel helplessly for the moment. The deadly calm Zeke ad-

[*Turn Page*]

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vanced on the pair. One dropped with a slug in his leg and the law-agent's second gun clicked on a hollow shell. He had already emptied his first. Dropping it, he leaped in, and that Bowie came out of his boot as the second man sent a shot past his ear. The next moment, that second one was a crumpled heap in the tall grass and Malone's knife dripped red.

A SLUG chunked into the wall beside him. It was Splinter, coming around the corner of a shack in the prison yard, with a gun he had procured. He had the drop on the imperturbable Malone then, but the latter squatted in a flash. Splinter ran toward him, knowing he had caught him with empty weapons. Then Malone half straightened and was slinging lead with a Colts he had ripped from one of the downed guards.

Splinter's second slug pierced Malone's hat crown. But the latter never lost his head for an instant; he didn't kill Splinter. His second slug smashed Splinter in the right leg and knocked him rolling with the impact.

Then, Zeke rushed away from the gates and was on Splinter before he could get up. The law-agent dragged him to his feet; Burt closed over. Then the three were making their way slowly toward the ponies ground-anchored to the right of the gates. A bullet from a rifle droned above them.

Ramming him in the back with his still-hot gun, Malone got Splinter Johnson in the saddle. He had to help Burt up. Two men reappeared in the doorway of the prison, but a sharp frantic voice hurled from the house porch. Ban Johnson, the Warden, stood out there, supporting himself by a chair.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he screamed at his gunhands as Malone swung up and put his Colt's muzzle against Splinter's back...

They rode out the gate. They took the trail through the tangled under-

[*Turn To Page* 130]

MEDICAL RESEARCH DISCOVERS TREATMENT FOR

PIMPLES

Acne, Blackheads, and other externally caused Skin Blemishes

CAUSES OF PIMPLES AND BLACKHEADS SEEN THROUGH POWERFUL MICROSCOPE

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SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH REVEALS NEGLECT CAUSE OF MANY SKIN TROUBLES

Skin Specialists and Medical statistics tell us that broken out skin usually occurs from adolescence and can continue on through adulthood. Adolescents often carry these scars throughout their life. Many never get over the "feeling of embarrassment" and are always conscious of their appearance and complexion. Persistent cases of "bad skin" sometimes continue on through adulthood. In this stage of life, the responsibilities of earning a living and meeting people are essential if you are to climb the ladder of success in your job. It is doubly important to give your skin problems *immediate care.* Physicians state that to neglect your skin may prolong your skin troubles and make it more difficult to clear up. And, there is no better time to get pimples under control than NOW!

Laboratory analysis using special microscopes gives us the scientific facts regarding those unsightly pimples. High-powered lenses show your skin consists of several outer layers. Projecting through this epidermis, are hairs, the ducts of the sweat glands and the tiny tubes of the sebaceous glands which supply the skin with oil to keep it soft and pliable. Skin specialists will tell you that many skin eruptions can often be traced to an over-secretion, of oil from the sebaceous glands. As a result of this over-secretion, more oil than is normally required by the skin is deposited on the outside of the skin. Unless special care is taken, this excessive oil forms an oily coating which is a catch-all for all foreign matter in the air. When dust, dirt, lint, etc. become embedded into the tiny skin openings and block them up, they can cause the pores to become enlarged and therefore even more susceptible to additional dirt and dust. These enlarged, blocked up pores may form blackheads as soon as they become infected and bring you the worry, despair, embarrassment and humiliation of pimples, blackheads and other externally caused blemishes.

Illustrated is a microscopic reproduction of a healthy skin:

The sebaceous glands are shown as they project through the many layers of skin. In a normal skin, the openings of the gland tubes are not blocked and permit the oil to flow freely to the outside of the skin.

DOCTORS RECOMMEND THIS TREATMENT

Physicians report two important ways to control this condition: First, they prescribe clearing the pores of clogging matter; and second, inhibit the excessive oiliness of the skin.

To help overcome these two conditions, Scope Products' research make available two scientifically-tested formulas that contain clinically proven ingredients. The first formula contains special cleansing properties not found in ordinary cold creams or skin cleansers. Thoroughly, but gently, it removed all surface scales, dried sebaceous matter, dust, dirt and debris—leaving your skin wonderfully soft, smooth and receptive to proper treatment. The second formula acts to reduce the excessive oiliness produced by the overactive sebaceous glands. Its active ingredients also help prevent the spread of infection by killing bacteria often associated with externally caused pimples, blackheads and blemishes.

DON'T SPREAD INFECTION BY SQUEEZ'NG PIMPLES AND BLACKHEADS

Clinical reports state that many people squeeze out pimples and blackheads with their fingers. This is unsanitary and may lead to the spread of the infection. This abuse may also inflame your skin and leave red welts and ugly looking blotches and bumps. As a result your face may be covered with pimples and blemishes. Soon you'll be sorry you ever squeezed or picked at your skin by using this unscientific method to get rid of skin eruptions.

COVERS UP UNSIGHTLY BLEMISHES WHILE MEDICATION DOES ITS WORK

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brush to the river. "All right, Splint! Get us across safe—or you die with us," Malone told him flatly. He looked back and saw the two guards at the gates with Winchesters, another atop the prison roof. But nothing happened; the Warden loved his brother too much.

And Splinter Johnson loved life too much. He took them across the safe passage through the quicksand, swearing and whining with the pain of his wounded leg. They got up among the trees of the opposite bank. Then a party of horsemen rode into sight. It was headed by Edson, the Calcedo sheriff. And beside him, arms trussed, was Al, the fat boss of the *Last Chance.*

"Dang it all, Zeke Malone!" Edson sang out. "Just when I think I've trailed down something, I find you there first—as usual!'

They talked quickly as Malone reloaded. Snooping about last night, Edson and his men had picked up the trail of Malone and Tom, the breed, out of Santos. They had finally tracked it to the *Last Chance,* where they jumped Al, after finishing the two gunmen there.

"From that fat slob's description," Edson said, "I figured it was you who had gone through ahead. But I never expected to see you get off Coyote Island alone. And—"

There was a shout from the island. After a moment, they saw a man in a cell window in the wing of the prison at the upper end of the island. He was waving a piece of torn shirt; It was Stollen.

"We're all holed up at this end," he called across the water. "They can't get in at us—less'n they want to pay with their lives. We're all right."

"We'll be coming back over right soon," Malone called and nodded knowingly to Splinter Johnson, propped against a tree. "A return trip mister." He looked over his other shoulder. A couple of Edson's men were patching up Burt Atson.

Malone found his string of bow tie was undone and carefully began to retie it. He wore a satisfied little smile. He had paid back his debt to Chuck Atson; he had gotten Chuck's brother off Coyote Island, alive.

A life for a death...

●

BALLOTS OR BULLETS

(*continued from page 98*)

morgue, Albert had not been moved; Doc Piper, personally,, marked the dead man's ballot in favor of Lincoln.

WHEN THE success of Herman's brilliant plan was whispered about town, his sin was forgiven. After all, he had merely killed a card-cheat; who hadn't? As long as the precious vote had been cast, anyway, what did it matter?

Como was a proud, noisy and happy town that night. After midnight, when all returns were in, it was found that Como was the only spot in all Nevada that had voted 100% for Uncle Abe Lincoln. No other town—least of all the hated rival, Virginia City—had been able to number all of the registered voters as official ballots.

By the following morning, Como became happier and more proud. It was learned, on final count by authorities in Virginia City, that Como had not only voted 100% for Lincoln. It had voted 130%!

On investigation, it was ascertained that a number of Como's loyal voters had voted two or three times, despite the watchful eyes of the supervisors. True, the officials had not permitted the two cows and one horse to vote, but it did not matter; Como outdid itself as it was.

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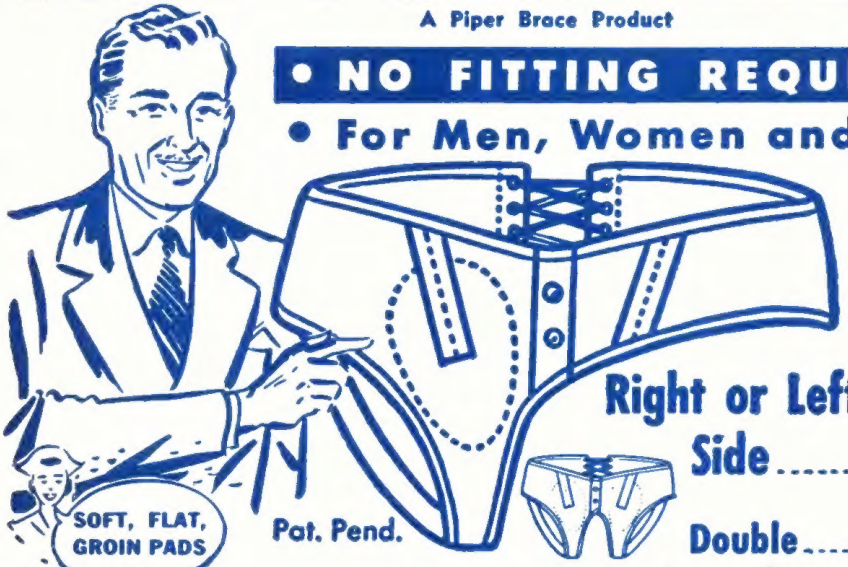

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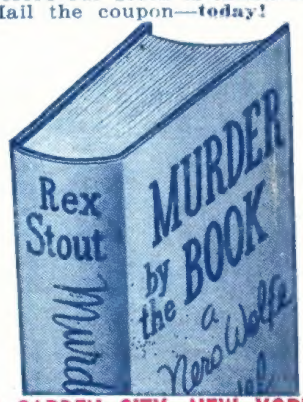

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